For her own

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For her own

by lumosatnight

Summary

> *Here she took out the stone that had the power to recall the dead, and turned it thrice in her hand.*
>
> Here Andromeda takes from her left pocket an unassuming stone, and turns it over in her hand.
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> It looks like the moon, she thinks. The round stone softly glows in the limited light, various colours attempting and failing to reveal themselves on its smooth surface. This one small white stone, meticulously concealed on her person since yesterday evening, will wreak havoc on her relatively calm life and leave irreversible consequences.

Notes

> A *mostly* canon and epilogue compliant story focusing on the three Black sisters as they grow up together, form relationships, experience the emotional violence of war, and eventually separate to follow their own paths. Frequently draws parallels to "The Tale of the Three Brothers."
>
> Shout out to my guy, R, for helping bounce ideas and assisting with the amazing pre-chapter summaries. And a thank you to my girl, K, for crying uncontrollably when reading things over and making sure there was some Ravenclaw representation. Also, my amazing roommate, L, for proofreading and hyping me up when I was doubting myself.
>
> Disclaimer: I am, obviously, not the creator of Harry Potter or any of the characters in them; those belong solely to JKR. I would just like to say that any vile opinions stated previously by JKR are hers and hers alone. I am absolutely a huge fan of her work, but not necessarily of her person.
>
> Happy reading!

Prologue

The Tale of the Three Sisters

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There were once three sisters who were traveling along a lonely, winding road at twilight. In time, the sisters reached a river too deep to wade through and too dangerous to swim across. However, these sisters were learned in the magical arts, and so they simply waved their wands and made a bridge appear across the treacherous water. They were halfway across it when they found their path blocked by a hooded figure.

And Death spoke to them. She was angry that she had been cheated out of the three new victims, for travelers usually drowned in the river. But Death was cunning. She pretended to congratulate the three sisters upon their magic, and said that each had earned a prize for having been clever enough to evade her.

So the oldest sister, who was a combative woman, asked for a wand more powerful than any in existence: a wand that must always win duels for its owner, a wand worthy of a witch who had conquered Death! So Death crossed to an elder tree on the banks of the river, fashioned a wand from a branch that hung there, and gave it to the oldest sister.

Then the second sister, who was an arrogant woman, decided that she wanted to humiliate Death still further, and asked for the power to recall others from Death. So Death picked up a stone from the riverbank and gave it to the second sister, and told her that the stone would have the power to bring back the dead.

And then Death asked the third and youngest sister what she would like. The youngest sister was the humblest and also the wisest of the sisters, and she did not trust Death. So she asked for something that would enable her to go forth from that place without being followed by Death. And Death, most unwillingly, handed over her own Cloak of Invisibility.

Then Death stood aside and allowed the three sisters to continue on their way, and they did so talking with wonder of the adventure they had had and admiring Death's gifts.

In due course the sisters separated, each for her own destination.

The first sister traveled on for a week more, and reaching a distant village, sought out a fellow witch with whom she had a quarrel. Naturally, with the Elder Wand as her weapon, she could not fail to win the duel that followed. Leaving her enemy dead upon the floor the oldest sister proceeded to an inn, where she boasted loudly of the powerful wand she had snatched from Death herself, and of how it made her invincible.

That very night, another witch crept upon the oldest sister as she lay, wine-sodden upon her bed. The thief took the wand and for good measure, slit the oldest sister's throat.

And so Death took the first sister for her own.
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Meanwhile, the second sister journeyed to her own home, where she lived alone. Here she took out the stone that had the power to recall the dead, and turned it thrice in her hand. To her amazement and her delight, the figure of the boy she had once hoped to marry, before his untimely death, appeared at once before her.

Yet he was sad and cold, separated from her as by a veil. Though he had returned to the mortal world, he did not truly belong there and suffered. Finally the second sister, driven mad with hopeless longing, killed herself so as to truly join him.

And so Death took the second sister for her own.

But though Death searched for the third sister for many years, she was never able to find her. It was only when she had attained a great age that the youngest sister finally took off the Cloak of Invisibility and gave it to her daughter. And then she greeted Death as an old friend, and went with her gladly, and, equals, they departed this life.

Bellatrix & Narcissa

Chapter Summary

Help! I've fallen, and I can't get up!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Leaving her enemy dead upon the floor the oldest sister proceeded to an inn, where she boasted loudly of the powerful wand she had snatched from Death herself, and of how it made her invincible.

Leaving the girl sprawled across the dirty ground, the older boy proceeds to turn his head and boast loudly to his scruffy group of friends swaggering beside him, bragging as if he were invincible.

"Next time watch where you're going you little bitch," he says, spinning back around towards the girl with an unpleasant sneer. He isn't even sure what "bitch" means. But he's heard his father call his mother that enough times after knocking her to the ground. So it must be the right thing to say.

His friends seem to agree, going by their muffled chuckles.

The six year old girl remains crying in the narrow alley, her neatly braided hair now coming undone, crisp winter coat etched with wrinkles, white lace gloves covered in dirt.

Bellatrix runs around the corner, long black hair curling around her, and stops abruptly at seeing the small blonde head of her younger sister lying near a puddle in the middle of a filthy road in Muggle London. A boy not much older than her towers over her sister's smaller form, pulling his foot back, about to send more dirt onto her stained shoes.

"Cissy!" she screams, her outburst stopping the boy mid-kick.

"What do you think you're doing?! Get away from her!" her panic at seeing her sister hurt and her fury at the boy who hurt her causing Bellatrix's shout to be louder than what is normally deemed appropriate in public. Unacceptable. She leaves her sister for five minutes and this is what happens. Mother and father will never trust her to watch her sister again.

"Oi, we got another one," one of the onlookers helpfully supplies as Bellatrix rushes forward to stand between the looming boy and her defenseless sister.

"I said get away from her," she repeats fiercely when the boy doesn't move.

“Make me. I dare you,” he responds, looking at her like she’s something amusing, not taking the challenge seriously.

Angrily, she raises her arms to push him away, but before she can make contact, she feels a sharp jab at her shoulder and finds herself on the ground next to her sister.

“Hah, didn’t think so, princess.” The boy smirks down at her.

Bellatrix watches, seething, as the boy strides away, his friends still snickering. She hates this feeling, not being able to fight back, not being able to protect her sister.

“You’re weak.” A voice appears in her head. It whispers to her, attempting to penetrate the deepest corners of her mind. She shakes the voice away.

She tried to fight back; she really did. Next time she will do better. She never wants to feel so powerless, so humiliated ever again.

She can’t wait to start at Hogwarts next year where she can learn real magic, not that useless dribble Uncle Alphard tried to teach her on her last birthday with the fake toy wand. What use is turning your hair pink and throwing up sparks? It wouldn’t have stopped that boy from hurting Narcissa.

When she can use magic, no one will hurt her or Narcissa ever again, especially not a bunch of poor stupid Muggles.

Bellatrix is extending a hand to help her younger sister up, when their middle sister Andromeda frantically finds them, their parents trailing close behind. The family of five shortly return home as it would be quite improper to continue shopping with their youngest appearing so disheveled.

This is the first time Bellatrix comes upon Narcissa fallen on the ground.

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The second time Bellatrix comes upon Narcissa fallen on the ground, she’s walking down the hallway to her fifth year potions class. A girl with wavy chestnut hair is muttering apologetically while bending over her younger sister, who again is sprawled on the ground, surrounded by her scattered books.

Recognizing the girl with chestnut hair, she pulls out her unyielding walnut wand, spouting off *furnunculus* without a second thought. Immediately, the girl stumbles back with a shriek as her face erupts in painful boils.

“Next time watch where you’re going you filthy Mudblood,” she says with contempt.

“You didn’t need to be so mean,” Andromeda tells her later, settling herself on the dark green sofa in the Slytherin common room. “She was already helping Cissy pick up her books by the time you got there.”
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Bellatrix, sitting in the solo arm chair by the fire, doesn't look up from her book about hexes and curses. The girl had been escorted to the hospital wing by her red-haired friend to see the new matron ("Madam Pomphrey," Andromeda smugly reminds her), and the two had yet to return. Still, the Pimple Jinx wasn't enough; she needs to find something better.

"It was only a warning," Bellatrix replies acidly, her focus on page 232 of her book about an entrail-expelling curse from the 1600s. She hopes there's a diagram.

"If I really wanted to be mean, the Mudblood wouldn't have been able to walk away at all afterwards."

"But why couldn't—" Andromeda starts to reply, only to purse her lips instead as she spots Narcissa emerging from the first year dormitories. Narcissa hates it when her older sisters fight, so Bellatrix and Andromeda make a combined effort to only do it behind heavy silencing spells.

Narcissa snuggles up to the middle sister on the sofa. Andromeda wraps an arm around her shoulder and hugs her tightly.

"Thanks Bella," Narcissa says after a long pause.

Bellatrix finally looks up from her book and into her youngest sister's open expression. The book did have a diagram, several in fact, and very detailed. She is pleased.

She regards her two sisters for a moment entwined on the sofa, her face blank, before giving Narcissa a cheeky wink and returning her attention to the fascinating diagram of a dissected large intestine.

Narcissa giggles.

Andromeda shifts on the sofa and starts braiding Narcissa's long blonde hair, as per their nightly routine. Nothing else is said on the topic. The night ends with all three sisters piled on the sofa in an uncontrollable fit of laughter pointing at a picture in Bellatrix's book of an unfortunate wizard with horse tails growing haphazardly out of parts of his body. Each time the tails move, as if to bat away flies, the wizard in the image jumps in surprise.

From that day forward, Bellatrix makes it a point to hex any Muggle-borns on sight. She's already used to hurling daily insults and cursing anyone who annoys her more than the usual half-brained idiot, but now she ruthlessly draws her wand on every Muggle-born at Hogwarts. A younger Hufflepuff boy unluckily gets hexed five times in one week until he learns to rearrange his schedule to avoid passing her at meal times.

By the end of term, everyone gives her and her circle of Slytherin elite a wide berth whenever she deems to pass them in the hallways.

Andromeda complains that people are ignoring her, too scared to talk to her for fear of Bellatrix's wrath. "That's too bad," Bellatrix tells her, "I'm doing this for you too, you know." Andromeda rolls her eyes but stops her whinging.

Narcissa reports going unbothered in the hallways, and it all seems worth it. Even after her eldest sister graduates, Narcissa is never bothered at Hogwarts again, Bellatrix's legacy living on.

Bellatrix feels strong, powerful, vindicated. To be able to control people, to force them to do her bidding.

And still the voice in her head murmurs...

"You're weak."

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The third time Bellatrix comes upon Narcissa fallen on the ground, she is barging into Narcissa's house after hearing the unfathomable news that an infant Harry Potter has defeated the Dark Lord. Impossible. Outrageous. And yet, she is Voldemort's most faithful servant; he would not disappear without telling her at least.

"Cissy!" Bellatrix screams into the cold abyss that is Malfoy Manor. "Tell me you heard the news! It cannot possibly be true. I will kill the blasted Potter boy myself!"

No response.

The Malfoy family portraits lining the walls look on at her disinterestedly.

"Cissy!" she yells again, agitation growing when she is met with more silence.

"Homenum revelio," she murmurs into the empty hallway. It would be just like her sister to sneak off to Madam Malkins to peruse the newest dress collection while the rest of the world goes to hell.

The low swooping sensation in her stomach, caused by the spell, confirms that her sister is indeed home.

Stalking across the first floor, she sends every door banging open at once with an aggressive flick of her wand. Cursing, she climbs the ridiculously winding staircase to the next floor and repeats the motion.

She finds her younger sister in the fourth floor study, usually only reserved for the Master of the House. Her sister is hunched over herself, kneeling on the ornate rug next to Lucius's intimidatingly large desk. One drawer is left ajar, as if pulled open in a hurry and then forgotten.

Her sister is clutching an innocuous looking baby rattle in her hands, grasping so tightly her knuckles are white with lack of circulation. She doesn't appear to notice Bellatrix's approach, either because she's in too much pain or too distressed to do so.

"Cissy," Bellatrix says harshly for the third time in less than ten minutes.
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“What—the—fuck?” She pauses to enunciate each word separately, finally running out of patience.

She hates seeing her younger sister like this. It brings out long forgotten protective urges in her, not felt since her time at Hogwarts nearly twelve years ago, when Narcissa would still wear her hair in a braid. Urges she does not want to feel towards her disappointment of a sister.

Narcissa, who grew up into a meek, complacent, housewife with no ambition, no commitment to the cause. Who is happy to let her domineering husband control her every action. She knows her sister didn’t even take the Dark Mark because Lucius said it would mar her perfect skin.

After having Draco last year, Bellatrix only sees Narcissa in passing at the Dark Lord’s meetings and for monthly tea with their parents. Both of which are spent making polite small talk and trying not to upset the other witches and wizards in the room.

“I c-c-can’t—” Narcissa starts to speak. She cuts off with a harsh breath, still not looking up from the rattle in her hands.

“They took him,” she finishes unsteadily.

“Took who? Draco is sleeping downstairs. Or he was, until I woke him.”

Bellatrix is beyond annoyed. She should be out hunting down the Potter spawn, not here comforting her sister about a misplaced rattle. She scans the room looking for any helpful Dark artifacts she can use in her search. None, pity.

“They took Lucius,” Narcissa at last manages to say.

Bellatrix scoffs loudly. “And they’ll be taking me any day now too, but you were already expecting that. What’s really the problem?” It’s not like they haven’t all been planning for this possibility, the ministry belatedly catching on and calling for their capture.

“The Longbottoms have been tailing us for months. When Lucius was arrested, I thought it was just for being associated with the Dark Lord, but then—she points to the drawer left ajar —I found this open.” She pauses, choosing her words carefully. “Lucius told me beforehand that if anyone found out, this drawer in his desk would be triggered to open.”

She holds up the rattle for Bellatrix to see. “I was to use the emergency portkey inside to take Draco somewhere safe, someplace far from England.”

“Lucius, what did he do that’s so terrible he can’t bribe his way out and you have to flee the manor?”

“It’s n-n-nott—” Narcissa struggles to speak. “I can’t tell you,” she finishes lamely.

“But now the Longbottoms know, and there’s no way I can get Lucius back. He needs to be here with me, with Draco.” Narcissa is shaking violently, her distressed face chalky white, as if the mere thought of being separated from Lucius is enough to cause her to faint to Death—

maybe it is enough. Her sister seems off somehow; maybe she should call a Healer before leaving to kill Potter.

Reaching down with impatient hands, she grasps Narcissa's bony shoulders and yanks her up to a standing position beside the desk. Narcissa leans back against it for support.

"What will happen if you can't get Lucius back? Why can't you take the portkey and leave like planned?" Bellatrix asks, confused. Something isn't right. It's not like her sister to be self-sacrificing even for the sake of her smarmy husband, especially not when her son's future hangs in the balance.

Narcissa fiddles with the rattle, having never left her hands. "I can't tell you anything specific, but Draco and I need to stay here. And without Lucius we're ruined."

"Alright fine," says Bellatrix, scrutinizing her sister and realizing exactly how thin and exhausted she looks. She's definitely not well. Stress, fatigue, or something more? She comes to her decision, brain already flying through possible scenarios.

"I'll take care of it." She starts towards the office door. Narcissa exclaims in surprise and despair, reaching for her, "No Bella, you can't! I'll think of something."

"Don't worry. I'll handle it," she states firmly, non-negotiable steel in her tone. "Stay here with Draco. Do not move until I send word or someone comes for you."

Not bothering to look at her sister on the way out, she bolts through the house and back towards the front gates before Disapparating away.

She Apparates with her husband Rodolphus onto the manicured front lawn of the Longbottom residence, the early morning light giving the quaint house an ominous hue; they don't have much time before the sun peeks above the horizon. A second pop announces the arrival of two more Death Eaters, Rabastan and Barty. She tells them the Longbottom's have information about their master's whereabouts, that they need to be interrogated under heavy duress. They believe her. Idiots, the lot of them, like the Dark Lord would let anything so important slip to a couple of low-rank Aurors.

How careless, not even a full two days since Harry Potter was hailed as the Boy Who Lived and the Longbottoms have already released the heavier of the protective wards on their house. They bring down the remaining wards within minutes. They grab Frank and Alice while their infant son is whisked away by his formidable looking Grandmother.

"Tell me what you know," Bellatrix demands, holding her walnut wand perilously close to Alice Longbottom's right eyeball. "Tell me everything."

Her useless husband stands guard by the door of their hideout—wouldn't want to be caught too soon. In the next room over, Frank Longbottom screams again.

"Please, we don't know anything." The Longbottoms are either magnificent liars or really don't know anything.

“Crucio.” Bellatrix directs her wand at Alice’s heart.

After agonizing seconds the pain stops, leaving Alice shaky and crying. Bellatrix dives into her distraught mind with a barely audible “Legilimens.” She’s already tried looking through Frank Longbottom’s mind and found nothing notable, then passed him off to Rabastan and Barty to play.

Alice’s mind is struggling to keep her thoughts behind its meager defenses. Bellatrix, being a skilled Occlumens herself—she didn’t become the Dark Lord’s right hand by spilling his secrets left and right—easily recognizes and burns through the pitiful barriers left.

She catches a wandering trail of thought. *Lucius,* it says. She follows it back to a child-size set of drawers; opens the topmost drawer. Memories are folded inside, neatly pressed, organized by shape and color. She snatches all of them related to Lucius and scatters them about to wade through.

Lucius, standing in Knockturn Alley, face shrouded in shadow, accepting a package from a hooded figure before walking away.

Lucius, arguing about transferring money with the goblins in Gringotts.

Lucius, steadily pointing his wand at Theodore Nott Sr. outside a seedy pub near Edinburgh.

On and on. Lucius, Lucius, Lucius. All in terribly suspicious scenarios, but nothing substantially incriminating.

Frustrated, Bellatrix is about to open the second drawer when a flash of perfectly straightened long blonde hair and petite figure catches her attention. She watches, perplexed, as a familiar man with greasy black hair and a large hooked nose enters the memory.

Oh my dear Cissy, what did you do?

Several moments later, she has her answer. Her baffling, highly improbable, inexplicably true answer.

“Who did you tell?” she purrs directly into Alice’s ear, not wanting to be overheard.

“N-no one,” Alice stutters out. Bellatrix grips her hair hard, a warning. “That’d better be the truth. If it’s not, I will find every single person you told and burn them alive,” her grip says.

Bellatrix faces a dilemma. She can’t simply obliviate the Longbottoms; the memories would be forgotten on the surface but a skilled Legilimens would be able to recover them. She could kill them, she notes, but she did promise the others a bit of fun. All it would take is a little extra push to leave their minds in total chaos, completely unreadable even to Frank and Alice themselves.

“Do it,” the voice in her head murmurs. “You’ve killed before. How is this any different?”

“You won’t be weak anymore,” it taunts.

“Let’s see who cracks first, you or your darling husband,” she says as she releases her brutal grip on Alice’s hair.

“No please. He doesn’t know anything. Just let him go... please.” Alice’s last words before being gagged with a swish of Bellatrix’s wand.

Bellatrix doesn’t let him go.

So this is the rumored Gryffindor bravery, fighting until the last breath. Is it really worth it? All this extra pain and unnecessary suffering. For what? The ending is the same.

Bellatrix watches as Alice Longbottom’s mind breaks.

Her screams turn into silence. Her twitching body gradually slows until she’s no different than a rigid statue. No last hurrah or triumphant “fuck you,” Alice slips away into oblivion, feeling pain no longer. Bellatrix releases the curse and Alice goes limp in the chair, staring dazedly into the empty air. She doesn’t acknowledge her torturers or her blank husband sitting beside her.

Something in Bellatrix’s mind breaks too.

Her powerful wand of dragon heartstring core thrums in her hand; she throws her head back and cackles madly, hysterically. Her chest convulses as she gasps for breath.

There is no happily co-existing, she realizes, in this world of ravenous snakes and lions, ravens and badgers. The strong will always destroy the weak… and she vows never to be weak again.

“Eat or be eaten,” the voice whispers.

Chapter End Notes

Cameos abound. There's only more to come.

Bellatrix & Lord Voldemort

Chapter Summary

Bellatrix goes to a sauna, tries yoga, and does some deep thinking in Azkaban.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bellatrix jerks awake.

She listens for any voices but all that meets her is the howling of the wind outside.

She's slumped on the dirty floor, her back supported by an equally dirty wall. Her legs are curled up to her chest, her scrawny arms tightly wrapped around them.

The rat gnawing on her tattered sleeve scuttles away and escapes through the bars before she can attempt to catch it.

She looks around the dingy cell, but there's nothing new to find. The uncomfortable cot remains in the far corner next to a lone chair and desk. The plate with untouched food sits next to the barred door just as she left it yesterday. A pile of dust is accumulating in the corner; Bellatrix has been fastidiously adding to it everyday. She can see the splattered red on the wall from where someone previously had hit their head repeatedly.

She turns to the window above her desk, the only source of light in the cramped room. The weather never changes; the dementors make sure of that. Bellatrix knows this, but she looks up out the window anyways. She's already spent hours, days staring out this window. Outside is bleak and grey, just like the inside of her cell. After a long while, she turns her head away.

When she glances back into the room, her gaze lands on her father who is standing beside the desk peering down at it. The desk is littered with lines, symbols, incomprehensible words, scratched into the wood by Bellatrix before her nails had broken and her fingers had bled.

"What are you doing here?" she croaks, her throat raw from disuse. She doesn't bother getting up from the ground. She hopes her lack of manners will irritate her father just that little bit more.

"I'm here to see you, of course," comes the reply. He looks up impassively from the desk.

"Doubtful."

"But I am."

She sneers. Her father hasn't bothered to concern himself with her in years. It would make no difference to him whether she was alive, imprisoned, or dead. Narcissa is the perfect daughter who her parents constantly dote on.

The head of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, as usual, is dressed in immaculate green robes, his posture stiff and formal. He looks exactly as he did the last time Bellatrix saw him, when she had managed to sit through an entire afternoon of her parents cooing at Narcissa's slobbering infant. After an argument had arisen with her mother about when she was finally going to produce an heir, she'd stormed out of her family home and hadn't returned.

"Your mother is very disappointed," says her father. He doesn't specify what is disappointing: the war, Muggle-borns, *her*.

Either way, she couldn't care less. "Tell her to get over it."

"You know she won't."

"That's not my problem," she tries to say haughtily, but it comes out more as a pitiful wheeze.

Her and her father are both stubborn enough that they could continue this useless conversation for the next hour, but Bellatrix would rather put an end to his unwelcome visit sooner rather than later.

"Why are you here?" she asks again. She doesn't expect an actual answer.

Her father is now staring listlessly out the tiny window.

"An idle mind is the devil's workshop."

"Fascinating," she says dryly, barely stopping herself from rolling her eyes.

"Indeed," her father muses, either missing or more likely ignoring her sarcastic tone. "An interesting Muggle phrase dating back centuries. I find I can empathize quite well with it."

Like a switch, her vague annoyance flares to an inhumane rage. "You dare use a filthy Muggle phrase in my presence!" she all but screeches before launching herself off the floor, hands ready to claw at his white throat.

She slams to a halt, as if an invisible wall is blocking her from reaching the other half of the room. Her father doesn't even flinch at her outburst, but remains studying the grey landscape. She struggles futilely against the wall, arms flailing wildly while spitting with fury. Her frizzy uncombed hair crackles around her with suppressed magic.

Her father turns away from the window to look at her and says calmly, "You and I were always too much alike." His expression would be sad, wistful even, if not for the manic gleam in his black eyes. One that Bellatrix has seen many times. One that she hates because it is all too familiar.

She snarls at him, teeth bared, her untamed magic swirling around her. Without her walnut wand, there is no release for her volatile magic. It coils up inside her, seeping through the cracks, begging to be used.

“I WILL NEVER BE LIKE YOU!” she screams at him, her vision going red.

“Oh sweet Bella, but you already are,” is the last she hears before she explodes, energy bursting out of her, scalding in its intensity. The room erupts in electric blue flames, instantly alighting everything inside, even her careful pile of dust cannot escape.

Suddenly exhausted, her knees buckle under her and her eyelids start to drift close. She squints through the sapphire flames into her empty room as she finally loses consciousness.

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A baby starts to wail in the third bedroom. A house elf rushes past, baby bottle in hand. Bellatrix is four. She doesn’t understand the big deal about babies. They’re loud and stinky and gross, but her mother and father haven’t paid attention to anything else for months now. She thought maybe things would be better after she turned four, but then another baby appeared and her mother fell ill.

Her father stumbles out of the bedroom exhausted. There are deep bags under his eyes and a weariness to his gaze.

“Where’s Mother? I want to see her!” Bellatrix marches towards her father.

“Bella sweetie, she’s resting right now. You can see her later.”

“I wanna see her now!” She stomps her foot, ready to throw an epic tantrum.

Her father, however, doesn’t let her get that far. “Enough! You will see her later. That’s final.” He starts walking away towards the master bedroom, probably wanting to check on Mother again or take yet another nap.

“But whyyyyy?” she whinges in the annoying way that only four year olds can. “You don’t let me do anything anymore! It’s so booooring!”

“Bella, honey.” He pinches the bridge of his nose in exasperation, scrunching his eyes shut. “Your mother needs peace and quiet to rest. Having baby Cissy was very hard on her.”

“Then just get rid of it. We don’t need two babies.” She thinks this is an excellent solution. *Why didn’t her parents do this sooner?* If the baby is causing her mother to be sick, then getting rid of it will make her mother better. In fact, why stop at one, why not get rid of both babies? Then her parents wouldn’t be distracted and play with her again.

“I don’t want any babies. I think we should—”

She is abruptly silenced by a painful smack across the face. This is nothing new in the Black household. When her mother is exceptionally displeased, Bellatrix and all the house elves know to stand a safe distance away when talking to her, lest she take her annoyance out on
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them. But this is the first time her father has lost control and hit her. She's too surprised to feel properly chastised.

Her father, however, instantly backs away horrified. There's a wild light in his eyes that makes her think he would very much like to smack her again even though he's quickly backing away. He retreats into his bedroom, leaving Bellatrix standing alone in the upstairs hallway, her cheek burning.

Bellatrix is thirteen. She's walking through the back garden with her father on one of his nightly strolls. She doesn't usually join him on his evening meanderings, only when mother is being particularly bothersome and nags more than usual during dinner. Her and her father have an understanding; they find solace in each other when the rest of the house becomes too much. Today's fight was about Bellatrix's less than stellar grades in History of Magic the previous term. It's not her fault Professor Binns is the most boring man, or ghost, in existence.

"You should listen to your mother more." Her father breaks the companionable silence.

"I will when she listens to me," she responds, sounding bored. It's an age-old argument, only formalities require them to keep repeating it. Her father knows she will continue infuriating her mother. She knows her father will try to talk her down every time.

But something is different today; she can feel it. There's a humming in the air, like potential energy just waiting to be ignited. She doesn't want to keep repeating useless conversations today, so she dares to say more.

"Everything would be fine if she wasn't so terrible all the time. Honestly, I don't know why you agreed to marry her. All she does is boss you around. You don't even leave the house anymore unless you get her permission. And Andy's turning out just like her."

She waits for her father's harsh reprimand for insulting the family such, but it never comes. He continues walking at the same measured pace, though his breathing has become harsher and his hands are minutely shaking. He is pointedly not looking at her, face turned resolutely forward.

She knows she should stop before she pushes too far and destroys the fragile balance the two of them maintain, but she doesn't stop.

"Thank Merlin Cissy is nearly mute or I'd have to kill myself just to be able to get any sleep at home. Really, I should ask Hogwarts if I could stay over the holidays. Then I wouldn't have to deal with Mother at all. She's a right bitch, she is."

At her last sentence, her father whirls around, body lunging towards her. His shaking hands surge up to grasp her pale throat.

"Shut up! Shut up you ungrateful child!" he screams, inches from her face. His tight grip threatens to cut off her breathing, her eyes start to water. For some inexplicable reason, she isn't afraid as her father rattles her smaller frame, causing her riotous curls to fall into her face.

“Make me,” she taunts him, looking up through her black curls, shining eyes glinting at him. She sees a matching expression on his face, black eyes so very similar to hers.

He suddenly releases her and roughly pushes her away. Instead his bone-white hands come up to wrap around his own bare throat and squeeze.

“Shut up. Shut up,” he repeats, but he isn’t talking to her anymore. He doesn’t seem to see her at all, staring past her. He mumbles repeatedly, lost in another inaudible conversation.

The voice in Bellatrix’s head stirs, the same voice that appeared when she was ten helping pick Narcissa up in a London alley. It speaks to her again. “That will be you one day,” it says.

“I will never be like him. He’s weak.”

“And so are you. You know I’m right.”

She meanders back to the house, leaving her father clutching his throat muttering in the garden. As she steps inside, she hears a distant cackle. It isn’t a pleasant laugh, more like the owner is in pain rather than pleasure. She shakes off the unsettling laugh and closes the door behind her. She makes her way to the sitting room, where she can already hear Andromeda’s shrill voice arguing about something or other.

Her father remains locked in his room for the remainder of the break and avoids her every holiday after. Her sisters, noticing the change but not the reason why, pester her mercilessly until she hits them with a Tongue-Tying Curse.

Years later, when the resentment towards her father has faded Bellatrix will wonder what the point of it all was. Why was her father so adamant on avoiding her after the garden incident? It’s not like she was afraid of *him.*

It takes her a long time to consider another possibility. He was the one who was afraid of *her,* afraid of what he knew she would become. When he looked into her shining eyes and recognized the same mad glint in them.

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Bellatrix jerks awake.

There are voices outside her cell.

“He seems so unaffected. It’s unnerving!” a voice says, coming closer. “Even asked if he could borrow my newspaper, calm as can be.”

There’s merely a grunt in response by the annoyed guard.

The pair is close enough that she can see the voice belongs to a short grey-haired man holding a green bowler hat.

He rambles on, “Never would have guessed that Sirius Black would be the sanest one in this place.”
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Wrong, obviously. She starts to laugh loudly. This is the funniest news she's heard in months, possibly years. She immediately decides the man with the bowler hat is a supreme idiot and Sirius is a superb actor.

She's seen the mad gleam in her cousin Sirius's eyes, when he was sixteen and they'd had a violent row about pure-blood responsibilities right before he ran away, the coward. It's the same manic look that's in her father's eyes, the same one in her Aunt Walburga's eyes, and the same one that she sees in her own eyes occasionally. Sirius may hide it well, but she knows what he is.

No one from the Black family could survive Azkaban and be called normal afterwards. And definitely not "the sanest one" in the entire wretched prison. She laughs again at the ridiculousness of the thought.

Dismissing the man walking past her cell as unimportant, she ignores the rest of his lengthy chatter.

Still chuckling to herself, she goes to look out the window. She sits at her desk and stares out at the endless grey. She lightly taps her fingers on the desk—2 quick taps, a precise 3 second pause, then 2 more taps. She doesn't care about her nails, already cracked and caked with dried blood.

The weather never changes.

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"Alright class, let's get started!"

Bellatrix stops her excited whispering with her desk neighbour as the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor calls the third years to attention.

"Today we will be learning how to banish a boggart. Everyone please line up here."

There's a mad dash to reach the professor first. A scrawny red-haired boy accidentally bumps into her. She harshly stomps on his foot in response, causing him to yowl in pain as he hops away and loses his spot in line. She promptly grabs her friend's hand and drags her into the line to stand in front of her. Her friend is so short that Bellatrix can see the rattling cabinet at the front of the classroom even over her friend's permed red hair.

"We've already reviewed the spell and wand motions last class. Just remember that whatever you fear, whatever the boggart turns into cannot actually hurt you. And that laughter is the deciding factor.

Miss Skeeter, it looks like you're up first." A small girl with limp blonde hair steps forward. The professor flicks their wand to open the cabinet and the boggart emerges.

Bellatrix has been especially excited and nervous for this lesson. The one and only time she's encountered a boggart, she had been helping her mother sort through old family artifacts in the attic. Being a curious eight year old, she had decided to leave no item untouched and no
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drawer unopened. Which is when she had pried open the bottom drawer of a ratty old dresser and yelped at the spotted olive green snake slithering inside.

Alarmed by her yelp of surprise her mother had come over to crouch behind her and peer into the drawer.

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid of a little grass snake. You’re going to be in Slytherin for Circe’s sake. You’d better get used to them soon.”

Her mother had then refused to banish the boggart until Bellatrix could bring herself to carefully touch the writhing body of the hissing snake. Her mother had laughed at her as she had rapidly jerked her hand away at the smooth feel of the snake’s scales.

After playing with Andromeda in the garden so many times and being sorted into Slytherin, Bellatrix is confident she is no longer afraid of snakes. But she’s impatiently curious to see what her new greatest fear is. Whatever it is, she will squash that fear too.

“Next!” the professor calls. They are already halfway through the line. Her friend steps forward, shoulders squared, wand out.

The boggart shifts, twirls, inverts, then splits into two people. They’re both crying. How odd.

“Em, why does the boggart turn into your parents crying?” she wants to ask, but doesn’t get the chance before the boggart speaks, a rapid volley of words as the couple tearfully talk over each other.

“They’re gone—”

“We can’t find them—”

“Missing for days—”

“Could be dead—”

“It’s all your fault,” they say in unison. Okay, that was eerily creepy.

Her friend is too startled to move. The rest of the class is tittering in confusion.

Bellatrix waits for a long moment for her friend to start reciting the spell. When her friend doesn’t move, she walks forward and sharply prods her friend’s frozen form. Her friend twitches into action, spinning around and bolting towards the door. Bellatrix can sense more than see the silent tears streaming down her friend’s face.

“I’m sorry, I need to send a message to my parents,” her friend tosses back over her shoulder. “I need to know if my brothers—” She chokes, gulping back more tears.

Her friend reaches the door and disappears with the shocked professor gaping after her.

“Well,” says their professor, “that was unexpected.”

The class mumbles in agreement. Bellatrix glares at them until they all fall silent, although she personally agrees. What an irrational thing to be afraid of. People die or go missing everyday; it will happen to someone in her family eventually too, but there's no reason to be scared of the inevitable.

"Ok then, you're up next Miss Black."

She steps forward. The boggart shifts again, merging, spiraling...

The lights flicker off, the room is plunged into complete black, somehow the light outside no longer filters in through the window. She can barely make out the silhouette of the cabinet in front of her.

The class panics. And then the voices start in the darkness.

"Why are you fighting me?" one says.

"You know I'm right," says another.

"I will always win in the end," one says loudly behind her, causing her classmates to jump in fright.

"You're weak," one whispers directly into her ear. She shivers but does not back away.

"Riddikulus!" she shouts into the darkened room, waving her walnut wand precisely.

The room brightens, sunlight entering again. On the floor in front of her sits an old-fashioned music box carved meticulously from shining wood. Instead of playing a jaunty toon, it spits out words disjointedly.

Actually, only two words.

"Fight. Fight. Fight," it says. "Wuh- Wuh- Win fight win."

The class snickers amused; Bellatrix is not. She remembers her father standing in the garden, hands at his own throat, muttering to the empty air.

Yes, she thinks, *I will win this fight.*

A rumor starts at school that Bellatrix, the eldest sister of the House of Black, was kidnapped as a child and forced to live in a cellar in complete darkness while her captors taunted her. She was only rescued when her wealthy parents had handed over an exorbitant amount of money in exchange for her freedom.

Bellatrix doesn't dispel the rumor.

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Bellatrix jerks awake.
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There are voices outside her cell. There are voices inside her cell. There are voices everywhere.

The voices are suffocating her, a cacophony of sound, so loud her ears are ringing. The pressure in her head is impossible, the voices unbearable.

She leans her head against the cool wall, letting the chill seep into her, numbing her. It's not enough, not nearly enough.

She bangs her head against the wall. If she can only feel pain, maybe she won't be able to hear the voices. It's not enough.

She tries again. Bang! Her head throbs, but it's still not enough.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Until she feels a trickle of blood descending her temple. Nothing is enough.

"Riddikulus! Riddikulus! Stop!" Her voice gets lost among the multitude of others. It's like she didn't speak at all, like she has no voice when there are already so many.

Her shoulders contort in on herself, trying to block the noise all around her. Her neck strains as she buries her head in her chest, hands clapped firmly over her ears. She lays curled on her meager cot hoping, praying, that the voices will stop.

Seconds, minutes, hours pass. She doesn't know.

Eventually, she achingly removes her hands from her ears and rises from the bed, leaving blood on the pillow.

She goes to look out the window. The voices follow her, but she ignores them.

The weather never changes.

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Bellatrix meets Bartemous Crouch Jr. when she is nineteen and about to be married. She isn't excited by the prospect but knows it's a necessary burden she must endure for the family. All of the notable pure-blood families will be attending, whether they agree with her family's politics or not.

At least Rodolphus Lestrange, her husband-to-be, is too dim-witted to realize yet that she's not going to listen to a goddamn word he says.

She checks her formal dress robes in the mirror one last time and tucks a black curl neatly behind her ear. Better get on with it. The sooner she gets this done with, the sooner she can finish that bottle of wine she started this morning.

Wrenching back the door, she prepares to stride out of the waiting room, and knocks stupendously into a wiry boy with a mop of fair hair.
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“Sorry, sorry. Was looking for the toilet,” the boy quickly apologizes. He looks to be about nine or ten years old, dressed in traditional formal robes, obviously here attending her wedding.

“Out of my way,” Bellatrix demands. She doesn’t have time for this. Her parents would be livid if she was late for her own wedding. On second thought, maybe she *should* be late for her own wedding.

“Oh, wow,” the boy says. He’s looking up at her with wide eyes. “You’re really pretty.” He blushes faintly, a rose colour barely visible on his fair cheeks. His mouth curves into an embarrassed grimace, like he didn’t mean for the compliment to escape him.

“Um,” she says, not sure how to respond. Being flirted with by a nine year old boy was not on her agenda the day of her wedding.

“I just meant you’re really pretty. I’d marry you if you weren’t already getting married. Also if I was ten years older. I’ll be taller then,” he blurts out. He blushes scarlet then, mortified by his rambling. He hastily ducks around her and sprints away. She wonders if his parents put a Babbling Curse on the boy or if he’s always like that.

She arrives at her wedding ceremony with a bemused smile on her face.

Five years later, Bellatrix is hurrying down the street outside the Ministry of Magic. The sun beats harshly down on the dirty pavement; she pulls her hood up further and continues her brisk walk, cloak billowing behind her.

If she can make it to the nearest Apparition point soon, she’ll arrive at the Death Eater meeting early enough that she may be able to catch the Dark Lord alone and discuss her plan for werewolf recruitment. She may detest the werewolves, but she understands the strategy behind letting them join the cause. Plus, the Dark Lord has assured her that as soon as they have outlived their usefulness, he will let her assist in disposing them.

She is so distracted thinking about how the Dark Lord will reward her for her genius plan that she runs straight into a gangly teenage boy with a mop of fair hair. The impact causes the cloak to fall from her head, revealing her face.

“Sorry,” the boy says, looking up at her with wide eyes. He must be about fourteen or fifteen, still growing into his long limbs and dark eyebrows. She recognizes the boy.

She grins knowingly at him, “What, not going to call me pretty this time?”

The boy glances down and coughs feeling embarrassed, clearly remembering the last time they quite literally ran into each other.

Bellatrix briefly runs through her mental catalogue of what she knows about the boy. Pure-blood. Crouch family. Mother, boring. Father, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, merciless Dark Wizard catcher, in the running for the next Minister for Magic. Interesting, very interesting. The boy could be useful leverage.

“How would you like to come with me for the afternoon?” she winks at him, stunning the boy. Before he can gather his thoughts to respond, she grabs his arm and Apparates them away to the meeting.

The meeting ends with Bellatrix glowing under the Dark Lord’s praise and a new follower ready to pledge himself to the cause when he comes of age.

Three years later when the boy comes of age, she takes him on his first mission.

“Wow, that was amazing” he tells her afterwards, body humming with adrenaline. “And you’re really frightening when you’re duelling.”

She grins at him, amused. “Barty, are you scared of me?” she asks him half-mockingly half-serious.

“Well, yeah. A bit,” he responds, but there is admiration in his voice, not fear.

“Good,” she replies, a smirk settling on her face.

“And you still think I’m pretty?” she asks. It’s a recurring line between the two of them, has been for years now.

“Of course,” he says sincerely like he always does, looking at her with those wide eyes of his.

“Good,” she replies.

Two years later, they’re being escorted from the courtroom on their way to be locked up in Azkaban.

The guards leave them chained in the holding cells in the basement of the Ministry as they await the rest of their paperwork. Barty has temporarily dropped his act and stopped pleading for his mother, now that there’s no one around to fool. Bellatrix can hear him rattling his chains against the wall in the cell next to hers.

When the guards come to escort the boy, they pass her cell on the way out. She presses her pallid face between the bars and clears her throat. The group pauses; the boy glances over at her.

“You still think I’m pretty, right?” she asks. The boy’s stare turns devouring, taking in her matted hair, scratchy prison uniform, and cuffed hands.

“Of course,” he says sincerely like he always does. *He’s not lying,* she realizes. He actually believes it, still believes it ten years later.

“Good,” she replies. The guards escort him away, his mop of fair hair ruffling as he walks.

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Bellatrix jerks awake.
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There's a chill seeping in from outside her cell.

A dementor floats by. Then another.

She sees them dragging a body past. It hangs limply in their scaly hands. The head, covered by a mop of fine hair, lolls grotesquely to one side.

She turns away.

Barty is dead.

She goes to look out the window. She stares numbly out, fingers unconsciously creating deep scratches into the desk. She doesn't notice when her nails run ragged and her fingers start to bleed.

The weather never changes.

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Bellatrix slams the front door to her family home. She's fuming. She's never racing Andromeda on a broom again. It's embarrassing, is what it is, a skimpy second year beating a fifth year on a broom. The little cheat. *Where did she learn dirty tricks like that?*

She angrily flounces into the house, and tosses her broom carelessly to the side of the front door. It crashes loudly into a Japanese vase, crafted by a long forgotten ancestor, before falling to the white marble floor with a distinct clunk.

She noisily makes her way to the sitting room, discarding her quidditch kit in pieces as she goes. She leaves a trail of gloves, wrist guards, knee pads, and shin guards littered throughout the long hallway. The house elves will pick them up later. Turning the corner, she stops abruptly in the doorway at the sight that meets her.

Sitting on her parents' posh sofa is the most intimidating man she's ever seen; his meticulously tailored black robes stand in sharp contrast to his bone-white skin. He scans her from deep crimson eyes, observing her grass stained trousers and sunburnt face. She flinches uncomfortably under his perceptive gaze. His lips quirk in the beginning of a knowing smirk.

She glares at him. How dare he smirk at her like that in her own home.

Her parents are seated across from the pale stranger, sipping tea from their best china, Bellatrix notes. Her father ignores her. Her mother frowns at her undignified entrance.

"Bella, must you tramp about the house like that? Go pick up your things immediately," her mother admonishes. She turns her glare on her mother instead.

"No."

She crosses her arms in defiance. Manners, be damned. She's not going to willingly listen to her mother, even in front of a guest.
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Her mother's ashen face flashes in irritation. Her father remains passively staring at the wallpaper.

"If you would allow me," says the stranger. She breaks the heated glare with her mother when the stranger casually waves a thin white hand. Her eyes are immediately drawn to the effortless sweeping motion. There's a rustling sound in the hallway and then her broom and quidditch kit fly into the room, zipping towards her.

Impressive. Nonverbal and wandless magic, seemingly with minimal effort. *Who is this powerful stranger?* He is not submitting to her parents every whim, as she's seen many of their guests do, so he must have a similarly high social status.

It's all very intriguing.

Her arms snap up to deftly catch the flying items before they can crash into her.

"Very impressive reflexes," the stranger comments. She feels her cheeks heat as she preens under the praise.

The aura of power he emanates is intoxicating. She unconsciously gravitates towards it until she is standing directly in front of the pale stranger.

From up close she notices that he's easily twenty years her senior, yet he exudes a youthful arrogance that immediately captivates anyone in the room. Sharp cheekbones, carefully styled black hair, and observant wine-red eyes. She's never paid much attention to superficial appearances before but oh, is she paying attention now.

"Bellatrix Black, eldest daughter of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, pleasure to meet you." She extends her right hand in greeting, moving her quidditch supplies to hold under her left arm. She goes not for a handshake like she would usually, but places her palm facing downwards like she would during the beginning of a traditional courting period.

If the stranger notices the implication or is turned off by her young age, he doesn't react. He only rises gracefully from the sofa, smiles charmingly at her and takes her hand in his, bringing it up to his lips to place a lingering kiss on the back of it. His lips are cold against her flushed skin.

"The pleasure is all mine, I assure you," he purrs.

Nonetheless, her mother does notice the placement of her right hand and tries to hide her gasp of surprise. She's never shown any interest in courting before. She knows she'll have to marry as soon as school is finished, but has so far ignored her mother's pleas to decide on a suitable pure-blood spouse.

The stranger turns to face her parents, still seated on the sofa, and says, "Well, this has been a lovely visit. Thank you so much for your support. I will be in contact soon with the remaining details."

With a slight bow, he bids goodbye and smoothly exits the room. Her father frowns after him, the first expression on his face since she entered the sitting room.

She peeks her head around the doorframe, hoping to catch a glimpse of the stranger's tall retreating form. Her eyes fall instead on the Japanese vase sitting serenely next to the front door, the same vase she had smashed carelessly with her broom on her way inside. It now sits overflowing with beautiful dark burgundy roses. The haunting black-tinted roses are the exact same shade as the handsome man's strange intelligent eyes.

To wordlessly and wandlessly summon her quidditch equipment while simultaneously repairing the broken vase and also conjuring intricate flowers would be impossible for almost any modern witch or wizard. To do so from a completely different room, magic remaining unseen, would mean the caster would be equally as powerful as the great Albus Dumbledore. Perhaps even powerful enough to surpass him.

Bellatrix's heart hammers in her chest, in fear or arousal, or both.

Lord Voldemort, as the man is called, or the Dark Lord, as he's called by his supporters, returns only once to her home to visit her parents. It is nearly a year later. Bellatrix is home for the summer holidays awaiting her OWL results before starting her sixth year.

He is heading out towards the front door. She is heading towards the kitchen to pester the house elves for a snack. Their paths cross on the way.

They both pause in their respective paths and nod politely at the other. She has recently been promised to the Lestrange boy, so it would no longer be proper for her to extend her hand in greeting. A shame, really, thinking of those cold lips pressed to her skin.

"I'm very glad to see you again, Miss Black. I would like to make you an offer."

His smile is pleasantly polite, but an underlying smirk shows he's quite aware of the double meaning of his words.

Bellatrix, with her heartbeat fluttering madly in her chest, responds, "And what would that offer entail exactly?"

"I have heard about your dealings at Hogwarts."

What dealings? Her almost failing History of Magic (again), her falling off her broom and nearly breaking her arm, her dominance in the dueling club, her hexing of Muggle-borns. All of the above?

He continues, "You are a very powerful witch, Miss Black. I would very much like for you to join our cause. It would be invaluable to have someone as skilled as you on our side." The winning side is left implied. But she can hear it in his voice, confidence leaking through.

"I accept," she responds a tad breathlessly.

"Excellent."

She can only nod in response.

“Then I will see you at our next meeting.”

He pauses, testing the words on his tongue.

“Goodbye, Bella,” he says and glides out the door, just as smoothly as before.

Bellatrix exhales a large breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding. She heads to the kitchen feeling the lightest she’s ever been.

The meetings are wonderful, being surrounded by like-minded folk who recognize the importance of pure-blood tradition.

She’s still not of age and can’t do anything terribly important yet. So she is tasked with gathering information about the current students at Hogwarts, who could become potential recruits, who could become potential threats. She takes this assignment very seriously and begins to mentally catalogue all the students and their attributes.

After one of the meetings, she purposefully lingers behind, hoping to catch the Dark Lord for a moment alone.

“Yes, Bella?” The Dark Lord approaches her. “You have something you wish to discuss with me?”

“I’ve been tracking the current students at Hogwarts, as you’ve asked. And I’ve come to recommend the few I think are most promising,” she reports.

She can’t help but feel overwhelmed by the mere proximity of him. She can feel his power pulsing around him, pulling her in closer.

“By all means, I will defer to your suggestions. Who do you have in mind?” he inquires.

“It will be easier if I show you,” she dares to say. Letting someone into one’s mind voluntarily is a show of complete and open trust. She is willing to give this to the Dark Lord. She hopes this will prove that she is already loyal to him and can be trusted with vital missions when the time comes.

He looks at her approvingly, aware of the significance of such an act.

He brings his wand to hover by her left temple. “May I?” he asks, staring at her face intently. She nods in response and loses herself in his glowing crimson eyes.

She feels the careful press of his wand against the side of her head and the gentle caress of a foreign mind begging entry into her own. She eagerly gives way to the feeling of the Dark Lord entering her mind and makes a mental note to ask him for help on her Occlumency and Legilimency skills, which will be useful for obtaining and securing information in the future.

The Dark Lord slowly probes into her mind, and she basks in the fleeting feeling of exhilarating intimacy. He diligently flips through her catalogue of Hogwarts students, pausing

occasionally at the more interesting ones. He views her excited anticipation during her first meeting. He feels her rush of arousal during their first handshake.

He moves deeper into her thoughts then, and she lets him, not fighting against the intrusion. He scans through her memories at Hogwarts, briefly focusing on a short red-haired girl before moving on. He sees memories of her and her sisters playing in her bedroom, her defiant expression during one of her mother's scoldings, her and her father arguing in the garden.

The Dark Lord pulls his wand away, breaking the connection. She blinks. Her mind feels upsettingly empty without his cool presence.

"An interesting condition, your father has." To Bellatrix's relief, he does not sound disgusted or angry, but cautiously curious. "It's a fight he will not win. He is already losing, and badly."

He reaches up to place his hand on her temple where his wand was moments before. His icy touch calms her. "There is no need to fight it; it is a part of him. If he continues to fight it, if he continues to fear it, it will win."

It is clear the Dark Lord is not only referring to her father when he speaks of fear and fighting.

"I understand, Master." She is so grateful that he does not scorn her for this weakness. "I will do my best," she promises.

"Please, Bella." He peers at her with his penetrating gaze. "You may address me as 'my Lord.'"

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Bellatrix jerks awake.

There's a voice inside her cell. It calls to her, soothes her, comforts her.

She opens her eyes, and looks into the piercing gaze of her beloved Dark Lord. He is still exceedingly handsome even if his unnerving red eyes and skull-like face are more demon than human.

"My Lord," she rasps, her croaky voice laced with gratitude.

"Do you fear me, Bellatrix?" he says.

"Yes," she responds, adoration shining through her eyes. "I fear and admire you above all else. I fear your disappointment in me, that you will not find me worthy."

"Good," he replies, a smirk settling on his handsome face. "That means I win."

She smiles, a feral smile with too many teeth. "Of course, my Lord, you were always going to win."
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“That I was,” he easily agrees. He rests a hand tenderly on her head, as if acknowledging a particularly obedient pet.

“Sleep now, my most devoted one. I need you well rested.”

As she drifts off into a peaceful sleep, she hears him murmuring above her in a soothing voice. “To feel fear is to know your place. I’m glad you finally understand yours.”

The words seep under her skin like poison, sink into her muscles, settle into her bones.

“Fear or be feared,” the voice whispers.

Chapter End Notes

What's real, what's not? Will we ever know? Will Bella?

Bellatrix & Molly

Chapter Summary

Em and Bee hash out some old history with a blast from the past.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The guests, adorned in opulent robes and salacious jewels, twirl lazily under the lowly twinkling lights. They swing methodically to and fro, perfectly coordinated in an intricate dance between the rich, the powerful, and the ambitious.

But Bellatrix notices none of this, as she glides across the ballroom floor. She slips and slides her way past the newly appointed Keeper for the Hollywood Harpies, narrowly missing elbowing her in the knee. She pivots around the Head of the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, accidentally catching his sleeve and causing him to stumble backward. But Bellatrix ignores all of this, as she chases after Andromeda across the ballroom floor.

“Hah! I got you!” shouts Bellatrix, grabbing the back of Andromeda’s beaded dress and yanking her to a stop. “I win. Now you have to do whatever I say for the rest of the day,” she brags, already thinking up embarrassing tasks she can make her younger sister do.

“You’re gonna get in trouble,” comes Narcissa’s chiding voice from beside her. “Mother and Father said to behave.” Their littlest sister is scowling at them from her perch atop an ornamentally decorated chair, her short legs dangling high above the ground.

“So?... Mother and Father are busy. They won’t even notice,” Bellatrix replies with a dismissive wave of her hand towards a crowded corner, where the Master and Missus Black are chatting animatedly with the Minister for Magic.

“Hmph,” says Narcissa, sounding as annoyed as any five year old can.

“And I’m nine. I’m the eldest, so I know what I’m talking about.”

“Nuh ugh,” interjects Andromeda. “You never know what you’re talking about,” she says snarkily.

Why does Andromeda always have to argue with her? As the oldest, she should automatically be the smartest; she should get to boss her younger sisters around without question. But *noooo,* Andromeda always has to complain and start an argument.

“Shut it, Andy,” she grouches.

“Yeah! Shut it, Andy,” a pair of voices chorus behind her. She turns to see two boys with startling red hair and friendly freckled faces bouncing toward them. Compared to their lightly tanned skin, their bright red hair gives the impression of burning flames atop their heads.

“Hi!” one of the boys says, beaming. “Nice to—”

“—meet you,” the other boy finishes, also grinning.

“I’m Gideon—”

“I’m Fabian—”

“We’re twins!” they exclaim together, wearing matching smiles of mischief.

“Yes, I can see,” Bellatrix responds frostily. She looks over their faded robes and scuffed shoes.

“Wanna play a game?” asks Gideon.

“We’ll go easy on you,” adds Fabian.

“Sure,” replies Andromeda before Bellatrix can scare them away. “What—” she starts to ask before being stopped by a voice in the distance getting closer.

“Gid! Fab! What did Mum and Dad tell you about wandering off on your own? What are you doing over there?” The voice belongs to a short girl with hair just as alarmingly red as the twins.

“Nothin’!” they yell in unison, exchanging a covert look.

“So sorry about that. They just turned four, think they can do whatever they want now, including wandering off to talk to strangers,” the girl explains approaching their table, throwing a quick chastising glare at her younger brothers.

“I’m Molly, by the way. I really hope they weren’t bothering you.”

“Was not!” protests Fabian indignantly.

“We were gonna play a game!” adds Gideon.

Andromeda quickly jumps in before the twins can be ushered away, always interested in making new friends.

“Yeah, we were! What game should we play?”

“Let’s play war!” says Fabian as he jumps up and down excitedly.

“If you catch us, then we hafta pretend we’re dead,” Gideon says, making a dramatic choking motion and coughing loudly when he accidentally chokes too hard.

“And the last one standing, wins. Yes, we get it already,” their older sister says impatiently yet fondly. She turns to Bellatrix and asks hopefully, “Did you want to be a team? We’ll catch them faster that way.”

“Sure,” replies Bellatrix.

The red-haired girl looks to be about her age, and she must also be the oldest in the family. At least this girl, Molly, understands the burden of having younger siblings who never listen to anything she says. Molly must also be a pure-blood, since only the important families and members of the Ministry were invited to this ball. The red curls on the girl's permed head are almost as riotous as Bellatrix’s black ones.

An hour later finds Molly Prewett and Bellatrix Black arm in arm, giggling madly as they chase Gideon, Fabian, and Andromeda across the ballroom floor. Narcissa, opting not to participate in their games because “Mother said I shouldn’t ruin my dress,” calls from the sidelines whenever Molly or Bellatrix pass her, directing them towards their hiding younger siblings and assisting with their dramatic demise.

Two years later finds Molly and Bellatrix arm in arm, strolling through Diagon Alley on their way to the apothecary. They gesture excitedly at the list of potions ingredients for their first year at Hogwarts.

After Bellatrix’s mother’s icy reception to Molly because of her blood-traitor parents, she had gradually accepted their friendship with a “Maybe you can influence the Prewett girl back onto the right track, but she’s not setting foot in this house.” Now their friendship is stronger than ever, as they meander down the stone street.

When Molly’s parents had dropped her and the twins off at the Leaky Cauldron, Mother had quickly disappeared with Narcissa to get a new cloak. Father had then wandered into Flourish and Blotts with a vague “Make sure you don’t buy too much” called back to them, even as his eyes were already scanning the rows of books. Andromeda and the twins had gotten distracted by the limited edition snitches zipping around the window of the quidditch store.

Bellatrix and Molly scuttle sideways through the door of Slug and Jiggers Apothecary, refusing to unlink arms. Bellatrix clutches her friend's lightly tanned arm in her own paler one as they bump clumsily into the frame and stumble inside. This causes them to giggle loudly and earn a harsh glare from the store clerk.

Finally moving apart, they roam about the shop and take in its rows and rows of shelves lined with potions ingredients.

“Em, come look at these jars!” Bellatrix points eagerly at a row of glass jars filled with foul-smelling liquids. “I think there’s eyeballs in one of them!”

“Eww, that’s disgusting,” says Molly, coming up to stand beside her.

“Yeah, disgusting AND slimy,” she joyfully states.

“Only you, Bee, would be that excited about floating body parts.” Molly sticks her tongue out teasingly.

“Well, I think they’re more interesting than those plants you’re always looking at,” Bellatrix sniffs.

“If I’m going to have a massive garden when I’m older, I need to know what plants to grow in it.”

“Well, I think they’re boring.”

Molly rolls her eyes at her friend. “And I think floating body parts are weird. But, don’t worry. No matter how weird you are, I’ll always be right there with you.”

“Even if we aren’t sorted into the same house? I know I’m going to be in Slytherin and everyone in your family has been in Gryffindor for *ages,* ” Bellatrix pouts.

“Yes, even then we’ll still be friends,” Molly assures her. Bellatrix turns away and secretly smiles. She wanders over to the next shelf, still grinning.

“Em, come look! I think I found the bat wings!”

Molly walks towards her, a fond smile on her face.

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“Mols, are you coming?”

Molly walks away from her, a hurt frown on her face.

“Yes, I’m coming!” she calls to a girl with dark brown skin and wavy chestnut hair in Ravenclaw blue robes. Molly hurries away, glancing back at Bellatrix in the corridor with confused pleading eyes, her bright red hair contrasting magnificently with her scarlet Gryffindor robes.

“Em, if you just think about it…” Bellatrix says later, plopping down in her seat next to Molly and continuing their conversation from the hallway. They’re in the fifth year Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. OWL exams are approaching at the end of term, so the professors are working them harder and harder.

“You’re a pure-blood. You can’t be friends with people like her.”

“Yes I can,” Molly says stubbornly, setting her jaw. Bellatrix prepares herself for one of Molly’s tempers. She’s seen her going off on her younger brothers when they tried to sneak out and scale the tree in the yard. One of them had fallen and broken their leg; Molly had been livid that they would be so careless, worried about their safety.

She is aware that Molly talks to other half-blood and Muggle-born students all the time, of course. What, with being in Gryffindor and all, but Molly has never interacted with them in
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front of her, choosing to use *discretion,* as her Mother would say. *What makes this girl with wavy chestnut hair so different? Why her?*

Molly slams her book open on the desk.

“What makes Dorcas so different from us!? You think she’s stupid just because she’s Muggle-born? She’s the top of our year!”

“It doesn’t matter. You still can’t be friends with her,” Bellatrix says with finality.

Molly looks at her, really looks at her, as if seeing for the first time who Bellatrix truly is. Not just Bee, her best friend of seven years who came to comfort her in the owlery after running away from the boggart in third year and who ruthlessly hexes anyone who dares to bully Molly for her short height. She sees Bellatrix Black, heir to one of the most wealthy and influential pure-blood families in the Wizarding World. She sees Bella, eldest daughter and devoted sister, hopelessly trying to make her family proud, while arguing constantly with her mother, and being harshly ignored by her father.

“I ran into Dorcas during holiday in Muggle London,” Molly says calmer. “I know you won’t think it’s as interesting as meeting the handsome stranger in your house last summer, but I never really talked to her before. She always seemed too intimidating in class. But then, when I ran into her outside of school, she was really very nice. Even introduced me to her parents; they’re both professors at a Muggle university. No wonder she’s so smart. Liking school must run in her family."

She turns in her seat to look at her best friend imploringly and continues, "I think you’d really like her too if you just tried talking to her.”

Really like her too, flashes in Bellatrix’s mind. *Like her too.* She feels a surge of anger pulse through her.

“See,” the voice in her mind says, “she already likes her new friend more than you. She chose her because you’re weak.” The anger grows, settling into a low prickling simmer just under her scalp.

“No, I wouldn’t,” Bellatrix finally replies, icily. “If you want to continue being friends with her, we can’t be friends anymore.”

Molly starts to sputter in protest, but is cut off by the professor announcing the day’s lesson on the Reductor Curse. She doesn’t speak again until the class is separated into pairs to practice casting on conjured chairs.

By this point, Molly is seething.

“You’re being ridiculous. I can be friends with both of you.” They move to stand in front of the chair.

“No, you can’t.” Bellatrix casts *reducto.* The chair barely flinches; she must not have even damaged it. She steps aside for Molly’s turn.

“Yes, I *can.* ” Molly waves her wand and recites the spell. A spiderline crack appears along the back of the chair.

“No, I was your friend first, and I say you *can't.* ” Bellatrix aggressively casts the spell. An arm falls off of the chair and the small crack turns into a large gaping cavern. Either she’ll need to practice putting a lot more energy into this spell, or this chair is ungodly sturdy.

“YOU CAN’T CONTROL MY FRIENDS!” Molly suddenly screams at her, face red, eyes bulging.

Her not yet uttered curse goes wild, a blinding blue light flashes from her wand. The spell blasts recklessly through the chair, leaving rough black scorch marks in the wall behind it. The chair begins to topple backwards, but before it can hit the ground, it disintegrates explosively into a pile of ash.

Bellatrix can feel her body warm with the lingering heat of Molly’s spell. She looks over at her friend, chest heaving, her face still flushed with anger. Bellatrix feels her body warm further and blood rushing towards her cheeks.

“Magnificent, Miss Prewett!” the professor exclaims approaching them and the destroyed chair. “And nonverbal! Is that correct? I didn’t hear you say the incantation.”

“Yes, that’s correct,” Molly barely manages to reply, her voice stiff with controlled tension.

“Excellent, excellent. Ten points to Gryffindor for marvelous execution of the Reductor Curse. Class dismissed.” The professor turns away, already focused on banishing the remaining chairs from the day’s lesson.

Molly immediately grabs her bag and bolts towards the door, leaving a flushed Bellatrix gaping after her.

Weeks later, when Bellatrix comes upon a girl with wavy chestnut hair bending over her youngest sister fallen on the ground, she doesn’t hesitate to viciously curse the girl until she can’t see out of her swollen face. Bellatrix doesn’t watch when Molly, glaring daggers into her back, carefully places an arm around the girl's waist and guides her to the hospital wing.

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Rodolphus mutters incoherently and turns over in his sleep. Bellatrix lays awake beside him.

The Dark Lord is displeased; she’s disappointed him.

She had failed to follow his direct orders earlier. “Kill any bystanders,” he had instructed, looking around the table of his loyal followers before dismissing them for their mission.

Just after dinner they emerge in an affluent Muggle neighbourhood in the London suburbs. Bellatrix saunters ahead of the group, with Rodolphus following closely behind. She casts *incendio* as she walks, leaving a trail of flames and burning houses in her wake. The first 2 catch fire instantly, alighting the cool night in searing heat. The next 3 pierce the darkness
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until it is almost as bright as the day. She moves onto the next 2 houses; the street starts to fill with a suffocating smoky grey.

This is her favorite part: the heat, the destruction, the power. To watch as someone's livelihood slowly, oh ever so achingly slowly, smolders into nothing more than a pile of ash.

She doesn't actually give a toss about the people inside. If they die, so be it; if they escape, well, the other Death Eaters will catch them soon enough. She just wants to watch them burn. She'd watch the whole world burn, if she could. Watch serenely from the sidelines, and then maybe go for ice cream afterwards.

This is a point of contention with the Dark Lord since she started going on missions a couple years ago. She's undeniably killed before, either by accidentally or purposely setting them aflame, but her purpose has always been to lose herself in the heat and the scarlet glow. Simple killing is distasteful… pointlessly nausea inducing, using the Killing Curse to take the light out of someone's eyes; she still has yet to successfully cast it. She's only managed to remain within the Dark Lord's trusted ranks because of her uncanny ability of exploiting people's weaknesses and her relish for strategic planning.

However, she's more devoted than ever to the Dark Lord and knows she must overcome this challenge.

A woman runs out in front of her, from a nearby house up ahead not yet set aflame. The familiar middle-aged Muggle woman has dark brown skin and smart-looking glasses. She was clearly drawn outside by the commotion of the neighbouring houses, possibly wanting to help.

Her mistake.

The woman notices her standing there in her Death Eater robes.

Now is as good a time as ever to try the Killing Curse again.

"Avada Kedavra," she says stiffly, aiming her wand of dragon heartstring core at the woman. The tip sparks with leftover embers, but remains undoubtedly un-green. The woman starts to back away, not understanding the intention of Bellatrix's spell, but afraid all the same.

Bellatrix tries again.

"Avada Kedavra," she says more forcefully, giving her wand an extra sweep at the end for emphasis, nausea growing in the pit of her stomach. Nothing. Her hands start to tremble when the woman full-on dashes towards the nearby house.

"Avada Kedavra!" Bellatrix tries for the third time, frustrated at her incompetence. A beam of green light tentatively leaps from her wand and hits the sprinting Muggle woman cleanly in the back. She falls to the ground with a faint thud.

A devouring blackness descends on Bellatrix's wand, chilling her arm and reaching into her soul. Her stomach turns uncomfortably.

Bellatrix is baffled. Why would the spell work now and not previously when the Dark Lord had asked her? One needs to mean it for the spell to work, and she's never meant it before. Did she especially want to take this Muggle's life, or did she only want her to die because she was extremely frustrated today? It doesn't matter, she supposes.

Dead is dead, she thinks, as she unnervingly looks at the unmoving body on the ground.

An anguished "Noooo!" rings in the crisp evening air.

Dorcas Meadowes, in casual Muggle clothing, her wavy chestnut hair framing her head like a halo, stands in the doorway to the house. Her horrified eyes look between Bellatrix's outstretched wand and the dead body of her mother lying on the cobbled path.

"Do it," the voice in her head says.

"Kill her."

She hesitates. She can't. Can't turn her walnut wand on the girl with wavy chestnut hair. Can't even mutter a Stunning Spell as the girl spins on her heel and disappears back into the house. Rodolphus is the only one who notices his wife's hesitation, and chases after the girl into the house instead. Bellatrix can only stare into the blank eyes of the Muggle professor on the front walk.

"She's gone," Rodolphus reports, reappearing outside. "Grabbed her Muggle father and Flooed away. Probably went to contact the Ministry; the Aurors will be here any minute."

"Didn't know you could connect the Floo Network in a Muggle neighbourhood," Rabastan, her brother-in-law, replies.

The Dark Lord is most definitely not pleased.

His punishment is relentless; his Cruciatus Curse causing her vision to white out and the tendons in her body to scream. When she is unsure when one curse ends and the next starts, suddenly, there is only stillness.

She shakily raises herself to kneel in front of her master. The Dark Lord pets her head soothingly.

"You did well, Bella," he says, commenting on her first successful use of the Killing Curse.

She feels a flutter of pride.

"Yet you still have much to learn."

"Yes, my Lord," she easily agrees, thankful that he is still willing to be her teacher.

It's not until she is moments from Disapparating away that the Dark Lord speaks to her again, referring to her earlier failure.

“You WILL finish this later,” he says to her, his deep crimson eyes narrowed into snake-like slits.

“Yes, my Lord” she eagerly promises, before returning home with a curious Rodolphus.

That night she thinks about the girl with wavy chestnut hair staring at her with horrified eyes. She sees the girl in blue robes calling to a short girl with curly red hair in red robes. Memories she has not dared to think about in the couple years since leaving Hogwarts. She watches as the pair walk away from her down the long hallway.

She remembers the angry set of the red-haired girl’s jaw, her keen gaze, the flash of a wand, the explosion of heat. She remembers scorch marks on the wall and a pile of ashes on the floor.

She soundlessly slips a hand under the sheets.

If that night she lays awake thinking about red hair, a flushed freckled face, and a blinding flash of blue light before drifting off into a blissful sleep, no one is any the wiser. Not even her husband, who remains snoring softly beside her.

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“Kill,” the voice says, when the Dark Lord brings in a middle-aged Muggle man with dark brown skin and wavy chestnut hair. She does. Arm shaking, voice unsteady as she casts the spell.

“Kill,” the voice says, when she is staking out the Ministry and the informant turned traitor, Rowle’s short-lived secretary fling, walks past her hiding place. She does. Grimacing, arm steady, as she casts the spell.

“Kill,” the voice says, when the Dark Lord tasks her with training the new recruits and hands her a house elf who tried to run away from the pure-blood family he was serving. She does. Glancing over to see her cousin Regulus’s queasy expression. Smiling slightly, as she casts the spell.

“Kill,” the voice says, when she is raiding an Order member’s house and comes across the McKinnon’s sleeping peacefully in their beds. She does. Smiling maliciously, as she casts the spell.

“Kill,” the voice says, when she is facing Gideon and Fabian Prewett in front of the wrecked remains of an Order hideout in the middle of a desolate forest.

“Been a long time, Bee,” says Fabian.

“Nearly twelve years,” says Gideon.

“Almost thought—”

“—you had forgotten—”
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“—about us,” they say together.

“Never,” responds Bellatrix, staring at their riotous red hair that she hasn’t seen in over a decade since finishing school.

“Wanna play a game?” Gideon asks.

“The last one standing—” Fabian begins to say.

“—wins,” Bellatrix finishes for him. “I remember.”

And so, they play.

Spells flying, red hair singeing, black hair whirling.

Her left forearm burns; the Dark Lord is calling her. She turns to her nearest fellow Death Eater. *Dolohov?* It’s so bloody hard to tell the difference.

“Finish them,” she tells him. He nods under his mask.

She places a white hand over the gleaming black of the Dark Mark and Disapparates.

She appears next to the Dark Lord in an empty field, and squints into the golden light of a brilliant sunset. The Dark Lord is standing calmly, in flowing black robes, above a bloody figure curled on the ground.

“It was a trap,” he starts to say, “intended to lure me out while the rest of my loyal followers were occupied elsewhere.” She watches him with rapt attention.

“Fortunately, I discovered the plan before any harm was done,” he continues, pacing in front of the hunched figure. “And now, I’ve found the mastermind behind this failed plan.”

He addresses the bloody body on the ground. “You thought you were so clever, didn't you? Distracting me so thoroughly.” He prods the figure sharply in the rib, eliciting a pained moan in response.

He stops in front of Bellatrix, his white skull-like face appraising her.

“What say you, Bella? What do you think of our clever creator?”

She finally turns to look at the figure on the ground. Blood spattered robes barely cover deep scratches on their arms and legs, but their dark brown skin and wavy chestnut hair are instantly recognizable.

“Finish this,” the Dark Lord commands coldly, his bright scarlet eyes narrowed into snake-like slits.

“Kill,” the voice says, the same as it did ten years ago as she hesitated in a rich Muggle neighbourhood.

“Kill her.”

This time, Bellatrix doesn’t hesitate to turn her unyielding walnut wand on the girl with wavy chestnut hair.

“Avada Kedavra!” she shouts with manic pleasure, watching as the green light illuminates Dorcas Meadowes in the golden grass. They leave the lifeless body in the empty field, with the smoke of the Dark Mark floating above it.

The sun sets radiantly on the horizon.

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Bellatrix beams. *It’s truly beautiful,* she thinks, *radiant,* as she looks out onto the Hogwarts grounds.

The air crackles around her with a mesmerizing array of spells. They merge, collide, fall in a rapturous rainbow of light. She hums as she weaves her way around statues and stone, students and their professors, the fallen and the fighting.

She knows her pink-haired niece is one of the fallen; she is happily responsible for that. She wonders who is left of the fighting.

There, on the breeze, she spots the girl. Her red hair flowing around her like a lion’s mane: fierce, strong, and so, so alive.

She is nine again, giggling madly arm in arm with a curly red-haired girl at a Ministry gala. She is at Hogwarts, watching the red-haired girl walk away from her in the long hallway. She is hesitating in a Muggle neighbourhood, unable to mutter the curse she so desperately needs, because she can’t disappoint the red-haired girl. She is in bed next to her husband, thinking about fiery red hair, lightly tanned skin, and kind crinkling eyes.

She is standing at the edge of the Great Hall, dead bodies littered around her, staring at the red-haired girl before her.

“Kill,” the voice says, “she is the cause of all your problems.”

She’s long ago accepted the voice in her head, and so she listens.

Bellatrix raises her wand and fires off a curse. A curse to kill.

The girl’s blonde-haired friend launches forward and grabs the girl, pulling her out of the way. Her other bushy-haired friend shoots off an Impediment Jinx from a walnut wand in retaliation. Another one of Potter’s infuriating minions, another annoyance to eliminate. Bellatrix blocks the spell easily with a flick of her wand.

They duel.

Three against one, but Bellatrix is winning. She knows. She cackles gleefully.
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The girl’s red hair is long and straight. It’s wrong. Bellatrix hates it, wants to get rid of it.

She sends her next curse hurtling towards the girl’s head.

“NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCH!”

Molly throws off her cloak as she runs, freeing her arms.

Bellatrix spins on the spot, roaring with laughter at the sight of her new challenger.

“How are you, Em?” she taunts, a wicked smile on her waxen face.

They duel.

Jets of light fly from both wands, and the floor around the witches’ feet becomes hot and cracked. Bellatrix laughs, enthralled, at Molly’s glowing spells flying mere inches from her. She hasn’t felt this alive in years.

She watches, a gloating smile still on her face, as a blinding blue light soars beneath her outstretched arm, aiming squarely at her chest.

It aims directly for her heart.

“Kill or be killed,” the voice whispers.

And so Death took the first sister for her own.

Chapter End Notes

That concludes Part 1! With Bellatrix's descent into madness and blinding ruthlessness. I, personally, like the idea that she and Molly were friends at Hogwarts, or at least knew each other considering they’re such similar ages.

Andromeda & Ted

Chapter Summary

Cissy doesn't like Andy's new boo. What's a girl to do?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Here she took out the stone that had the power to recall the dead, and turned it thrice in her hand.

Here Andromeda takes from her left pocket an unassuming stone, and turns it over in her hand.

Silently closing the door to the empty classroom behind her, she leans back against it with a heavy sigh, eyes closed, not bothering to turn the light on in the moonlit room. She slowly opens her eyes and stares determinedly at her open palm. *It looks like the moon,* she thinks. The round stone softly glows in the limited light, various colours attempting and failing to reveal themselves on its smooth surface.

This one small white stone, meticulously concealed on her person since yesterday evening, will wreak havoc on her relatively calm life and leave irreversible consequences.

She remembers the previous night in this very room. Ted, her Ted, nervously getting down on one knee.

He tilts his head up, resolutely looking directly into her stunned face. He takes her left hand in both of his; his rough larger hands are warm, just like his gaze whenever he looks at her.

"Dromeda, I know I'm not going about this the traditional way… but I frankly don't give a shite what your parents think, so I didn't bother asking them."

She frowns slightly at that and moves to pull her hand away. Ted Tonks visibly falters before taking a deep breath and squaring his shoulders. His grip tightens on her hand in his. Voice purposely steady, he continues.

"I love you, so much. And I want to spend the rest of my life with you, no matter what anyone else says. Even if your parents think I will never be good enough for you. Even if your sister continues to hex me every time she sees me because she thinks I'm the scum of the earth. Even if your other sister coldly ignores me then steals my letters to you over the summer hoping that you'd forget about me. I know how important your family is to you and I realize that they will never approve of me because I'm Muggle-born, but I still need to take this chance."

Andromeda, panicking, can only stare wide-eyed as Ted reaches into his cloak and takes out a plain black jewelry box. He must have been pacing the grounds before this if he's wearing his cloak right now. She catches a glimpse of a sultry copper orange rose peeking out of his cloak pocket.

He opens the velvety jewelry box to reveal a beautifully simple ring: a thin silver band with a small opal glinting up at her.

"Dromeda," he says again, while looking up at her with hope in his eyes.

"You are the absolute best part of coming to Hogwarts. I cannot imagine my life without you in it. After we graduate I want us to be together, really together. I want to kiss you everyday, introduce you to my parents, buy a house together... I don't want to hide anymore." He pauses, willing himself to say the final words.

"Will you marry me?"

Silence.

A thick oppressive silence.

It seems the entire castle is staying quiet just for this moment.

She can't think, can't breathe, can't even move. *What is happening? This wasn't supposed to happen.* Her midnight dates with Ted were supposed to be a bit of fun, secretly rebelling against her strict conservative parents while satisfying her curiosity about the cute Hufflepuff boy with the kind eyes who helped her with Charms homework. Ted wasn't supposed to love her; she wasn't supposed to love him back.

Ted, getting even more anxious in the silence, babbles on, slurring his words.

"I know this must seem sudden, but I've felt this way for a while now. We don't have to rush. It can be this summer, next year, or five years from now..."

Finally regaining the ability to move, she abruptly pulls away. Blinking rapidly to clear her head, she musters all the stoic calm of her father, the infallible and unmoving head of House Black.

"You need to stop this, right now," Andromeda says to him, only a slight quiver in her voice giving her away.

"You and I both knew when we started that there was no future for us. Why are you doing this?"

She can barely finish speaking before turning away to hide her frustration, her longing. It doesn't matter if she loves Ted; it doesn't matter at all. She is a Black and she will have a pure-blood husband and have pure-blood children who will have pure-blood grandchildren. There is no other option. She may not always agree with her family's rules, but she loves her family, more than anything. She will not disappoint them.

“Because... I needed you to know,” Ted replies slowly, cautiously. He can tell that she is unravelling, so close to the edge, barely hanging on. So close to what, though? To admitting that this ever present connection between them is more than a shallow fling or to turning away and running out of this room and out of his life for good?

He rises from the floor, ring still in his hands, glaring ostentatiously at her when moments before it seemed so modestly simple.

He takes her limp hand, presses the soft jewelry box into it. She’s still not looking at him, can’t stand the sight of him. Everything she wants, but can never have.

“Think about it, please,” he begs before chastely kissing her cheek, turning away and walking out the classroom door. She sees a fleeting flash of the copper orange rose lying forgotten in his pocket.

A knock on the classroom door startles her from her thoughts: 2 quick taps, a precise 3 second pause, then 2 more taps. It was the knock they used as kids, sneaking into each other's rooms when they thought their parents were asleep.

She forces her face into a blank mask. She may not be the well-bred prodigy her parents had envisioned, but her extensive etiquette lessons starting at age four taught her at least one thing: how to seem unbothered when everything's falling apart around you.

Stepping away from the door, she opens it to reveal her sixteen year old sister, primly dressed even after curfew, shockingly blonde hair neatly braided half-up in a style taken directly from the newest edition of *Witch Weekly.* She should know; she’s the one that got her little sister the magazine subscription last Christmas after all.

“Cissy,” she says, emotionless. She’s the one that called her here; she needs to at least appear that she has things under control. Though with her chalky complexion and hunched shoulders, it may be a futile effort.

“Andy,” her younger sister replies just as coolly, smoothly gliding into the empty moonlit room, as only the purely aristocratic can do.

A long pause. Neither wants to be the one to speak first. They aren’t exactly on bad terms, neither are they on good terms. After Bellatrix graduated three years earlier and almost immediately married the insufferably rich and unbearably vile Rodolphus Lestrange, their unbreakable sister dynamic seemed just that, breakable.

Bellatrix started writing less and less, not wanting to interact with “you silly school children, caring about your trivial assignments. I have much more important things to do than keeping up with your boring lives.”

“I need your advice,” she says to her younger sister.

It’s risky revealing her hand right away, not very Slytherin of her, but she’d never been the cunning type of Slytherin. Maybe the ambitious sort, or at least when she wanted to be. And this is her little sister, who understands her as much as anyone could.

“It must be important if you called me out here in the middle of the night. We barely acknowledge each other in the hallways and you suddenly want a private chat.” Narcissa gracefully inclines her head, posture ram-rod straight, pale hands delicately laced in front of her, ever the elegant pure-blood.

Narcissa stares impassively, except for the slight twitch of her fingers that gives away her curiosity, her eagerness. Andromeda is glad to note that she can still read her sister like when they were younger and Narcissa would cling to her during a thunderstorm.

“Are you scared?” Andromeda would ask as she looked on at her sister’s nervous frame shadowing the doorway to her bedroom.

“No, of course not,” five year old Narcissa would reply, her fingers twitching, revealing how she was more affected than she wanted to admit. “I just wanted to talk to you,” she would say as she climbed into Andromeda’s bed.

Bellatrix would always arrive, not five minutes later, complaining about how cold her room was, especially during thunderstorms. “Do you think my room’s cursed?” she’d ask while also climbing into Andromeda’s warm bed and winding her arms around both sisters.

“Maybe... We should ask Mother and Father in the morning,” she would reply with Narcissa agreeing vigorously beside her. They never did ask. They all knew Bellatrix would have joined them regardless, always wanting to make sure that her two younger sisters were okay.

Later, when Bellatrix had left for Hogwarts and Narcissa would silently crawl into Andromeda’s bed, they still left an open space, as if waiting for their eldest sister to return home.

But Narcissa no longer crawls into her bed during thunderstorms and Bellatrix is never coming back, not in the way that Andromeda really needs. She still sees her older sister over the holidays, but it’s not the same. After every conversation, Andromeda wonders when they started hiding more than they can share, when they stopped trusting each other.

She stares at the youngest Black sister now, wondering if this will be one of the last times she talks to her, without animosity or feelings of betrayal.

“Ted proposed to me last night,” she states bluntly, all caution thrown out the window. Either Narcissa will pause, listen to her, and offer real advice or she will sneer, walk away, and pretend this conversation never happened. It all depends on how much their relationship has already deteriorated.

To her relief, her sister does pause, briefly, but it’s a pause nonetheless. Her pale face falters, flashing through surprise, then anger, and finally settling on disappointment before responding.

“I assume you accepted, and now you want my advice on the best way to tell the rest of the family.” She does sneer a bit at the end, the word *family* twisting, like it’s a concept Andromeda couldn’t possibly understand.

Given the circumstances, it's a valid assumption, but she's still stupidly hurt that Narcissa doesn't even think she would discuss this with her first, such a life-altering decision.

She never told Ted what her family is really like. They wouldn't just disapprove of their relationship; they would do everything in their power to stop them, possibly even going so far as disappearing Ted. She could never tell him that.

Narcissa is the only one who knows about Ted, about Andromeda's sordid affair with a Muggle-born.

It was the letters from last summer addressed to "My dearest Dromeda" and signed "Love, Your Ted" that gave it away. She told him not to write, but Ted is a stubborn bastard, and she was secretly pleased when he ignored her pleas. The little jolt her heart made whenever she received a new letter told her exactly how much she liked it.

Of course, Narcissa found them and promptly destroyed them.

In the biggest row they'd had in years, Andromeda found herself crying amidst a pile of irreparably burned parchment with Narcissa standing over her, angrily casting *incendio* on any papers in sight, letter of not.

"You need to stop this, right now," Narcissa says, her wand shaking in her hands. The same words that Andromeda will use not even a year later when Ted is kneeling in front of her, heart laid bare.

"You can't do this to yourself. You can't do this to me, to our family." Andromeda knows she's right. Her unlikely relationship with Ted has no future, not that it ever did. She can't throw away her family's legacy, their trust, for some insignificant boy she briefly fancies.

She picks up her own wand and burns the rest of the letters. It's a small mercy that both Master and Missus Black were out fawning over Bellatrix and her new husband that particular summer day.

Neither Narcissa nor Andromeda mention it for the rest of the summer holidays. When term starts again, Andromeda is wary about starting her seventh and final year. Narcissa doesn't outwardly treat her any differently, but no longer seeks her out. She's determined to ignore Ted and stop these insidious feelings inside her.

But old habits die hard… It's already May by the time she realizes it's impossible to ignore these unrelenting emotions and she was a fool to think otherwise, as she looks into the disappointed face of her younger sister.

Trying not to sound offended by her sister's response, she says, "Don't be ridiculous. I haven't made a decision yet. That's why I'm asking for your advice." She relaxes her stance, hoping to appear more open to conversation and stop Narcissa being on the defensive.

"And why would you take my advice now? You certainly didn't before." Her sister is outright sneering now, no more hiding behind a polite facade.

Andromeda buries her face in her hands, no longer trying to appear composed now that she knows Narcissa will at least stay to listen.

“I tried, I really did, but things got out of my control and it’s too late to change now… He loves me, and I love him. I don’t know what to do… Cissy, what do I do?” She still hasn’t looked up, afraid to see her sister’s response to her desperate pleading.

As such, she misses Narcissa’s momentary look of absolute devastation, before schooling her expression into one of polite interest. Without malice she says, “I don’t see why you need my advice as it’s ultimately your decision.”

Andromeda cautiously peaks through her fingers still covering her face. Noting that Narcissa is no longer sneering, but merely looking at her curiously. She raises her head and gratefully looks at her sister full on.

Narcissa continues, “I only have one question to ask you then.” She looks suddenly nervous, fingers reaching up to mess with her meticulously done hair.

Andromeda nods once, signalling that she’s intently listening to whatever comes next.

“Which one can you live without, him or us?”

It is not until hours later under the full moon, as Andromeda lays in her bed in the Slytherin seventh year dormitory fiddling with the stone, that the answer comes to her.

She whispers it into the dark, at once both aggressively relieved that she has made her decision and heart-wrenchingly miserable thinking about the inevitable separation to come.

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“Mind if I sit here?”

A cute Hufflepuff boy stands by her table in the library, gesturing to the empty chair across from her. She’s seen him in her sixth year Charms class; he never raises his hand, but always answers correctly when the professor calls on him.

Andromeda quickly scans the library. *Damn, there really aren’t any open seats left.* She could tell him to bugger off, she supposes, but she doesn’t want to be seen as *that type* of Slytherin, the type who refuses to talk to half their classmates just because they’re related to Muggles, the type like her older sister.

She briefly dips her head in acquiescence and returns her attention to her essay on cleaning spells. There’s SO many books to read through. This essay is going to take her at least the rest of the day to finish.

Her and the boy sit in amicable silence, each studiously ignoring the other while they slog through hours and hours of homework.

“Ugh, fuck it all,” Andromeda groans, roughly closing the thick tomb in front of her, and bringing her hands up to rub her tired eyes. A low chuckle comes from across the table. She
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stiffens and blinks her eyes open in surprise. She had completely forgotten about the boy sitting across from her, so focused on finishing her essay, not that that seems likely anytime soon.

“Anything I can help with?” the boy asks, both genuinely concerned and faintly amused by her slip of the tongue. She considers him, as she looks over into his friendly face.

“It’s just that… it would go so much faster if I didn’t have to spend all this time looking through every single book about cleaning charms just to find the few paragraphs that are useful.” She finishes complaining with a huff, her frizzy auburn hair falling out of her messy bun and falling over her shoulder. A hint of her rose perfume wafts over to the boy, striking him dumb.

“I can help with that, actually,” he says. “I was doing some research a while back and found this really neat spell. It lets you search for a word or phrase and the book will open directly to every page that has the word on it. I can show you if you’d like?” he finishes hopefully.

She leans forward intrigued. The boy’s ears flush pink, but she doesn’t notice. *Where has this spell been all her life?* This would have saved her so many hours of slaving away at the library. She always did prefer practical application to written work. She signals for him to demonstrate the spell.

“Ok so, it’s really just a variation on the Revealing Charm, but modified to find and reveal specific words. For example, if you wanted to find a passage about Scouring Charms, you would wave your wand like this...”

The boy makes a twisting then a looping motion with his wand. “Verbum revelio, Scouring Charms,” he says at the same time that he moves his wand. In the next instant, her book flips open and waits on the table in front of her with several pages suspended above it, as if being held open by multiple invisible hands.

“Wow, let me try!” She eagerly turns to the enormous stack of books waiting for her perusal at the end of the table.

“Verbum revelio, Scouring Charms,” she says waving her wand enthusiastically. Every book in the immense stack snaps open at once. They battle for an open space on the table. Some drop to the hard ground with a deafening thud; the cranky librarian shushes them. One dives directly into her lap, its pages fluttering at her, coaxing her to read it first.

The boy is giving her an astonished look that is both sheepish and impressed.

“Um yeah, that can happen sometimes when you aren’t focusing hard enough on one book. The first time I tried the spell, I caused an entire shelf of books to flap away. I also think it’s interesting that it works on invisible ink as well and the spell won’t wear off until the castor either…” he trails off when she doesn’t look up from the book in her lap.

She belatedly realizes his rambling and looks up with a delighted smile.

“It’s brilliant!” she assures him happily.

Ted Tonks smiles at her, dimples appearing on his beige cheeks at the corners of his soft pink lips. His sandy blonde hair falls messily into his warm hazel eyes. Andromeda desperately wants to reach over and ruffle it, but she restrains herself.

Later, she thinks, startling herself with the thought. These are dangerous thoughts to have about a Muggle-born boy in her charms class.

She decides, right then, to halt these enticing images and returns to her essay. She finishes her essay on cleaning spells within the hour.

The next day when the boy approaches her and gestures to the empty chair again, she merely dips her head in acquiescence, smiling secretly to herself, and clears her books from his side of the table in response.

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By mid-summer after finishing Hogwarts, Andromeda is sneaking out of the Black family mansion, luggage in tow. Narcissa watches her leave despondently from the stair landing, not intervening, just watching. Bellatrix is long gone working on some mission for a self-proclaimed up-and-coming dark lord.

Their parents are fast asleep in the master bedroom. In the morning, they will wake to a tearful letter explaining the abrupt disappearance of one of their beloved children. Frequent shrieks of "It's your fault our daughter turned into a blood-traitor!" and some more colourful variations will be heard throughout the house, but they will not go after her.

Some say their yelling will be heard all the way from a certain sitting room in a dreary house at 12 Grimmauld Place where Andromeda Black will soon be burned off the family tree.

Andromeda glances back one last time and spots Narcissa watching her from the top of the stairs. The middle Black sister gives the youngest Black sister one last nod before rushing out the door.

Narcissa doesn't nod back; there is no longer a middle Black sister for her to nod to.

She continues to stare at the closed front door until her eyelids begin to droop with either fatigue or tears. Narcissa removes her braid, and goes and climbs into Andromeda's bed one last time, comforted by the lingering smell on the sheets.

As soon as her head touches the pillow, she's bothered by a soft crinkling sound. Reaching under the pillow, she finds a plain envelope with "Dearest Cissy," elegantly written on the front. Her immediate thought is to tear it into so many pieces, even a *reparo* wouldn't be able to fix it. She doesn't want to read it, doesn't want to see Andromeda explaining why she's abandoning her own family, abandoning her.

But she does read it.

It says exactly what she thought it would, pages and pages of Andromeda begging for her forgiveness, pleading with her that things don't have to change between them; they can still
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be sisters.

The arrogance of love, she thinks. That Andromeda can presume nothing will change between them, when overnight she's the one who broke them.

Narcissa throws the letter violently on the ground, disgusted, and falls asleep with the smell of Andromeda surrounding her.

When the house elves come to clean early the next morning, the bed is empty, a discarded letter lies haphazardly next to it. If they were to look closely, they would notice that the last page of the letter is missing.

The page of the letter containing six terrifying words, whispered in the dead of night, that changed everything.

"I can not live without him."

Chapter End Notes

Verbum revelio (reveal words) spell is my own mismash creation. If there is already a spell with that purpose, my bad; I couldn't find it anywhere.

Andromeda & Nymphadora

Chapter Summary

Being a pink-haired metamorphmagus Auror is harder than it looks, just ask Dora.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Mum! Dad!”

Nymphadora Tonks bounds through the door, pink hair flying off her shoulder as she runs straight into her mum’s embrace.

“Guess what?” she gushes, now clasping tightly onto her dad. “I passed! I’m in! You’re looking at an official real deal auror! I’m finally done with training." She grins brightly up at her parents.

“Dora! Sweetheart, that’s wonderful. Congratulations!” Her dad instantly responds, going in for another hug. This time picking up his overly excited twenty year old daughter and distracting her by twirling her around. This causes her hair to turn a cheerful yellow as she inelegantly snorts, trying to contain her laughter.

He quickly glances over at his wife, Nymphadora’s mum, the love of his life, who hasn’t moved since their daughter released her. There’s conflicting expressions of pride and utter terror on her lovely face.

He gives his wife an extra few seconds to compose herself by performing one last twirl with his daughter, complete with a full body dip followed by an excessive number of bows. He’s tipping his nonexistent hat to their imaginary audience when his wife snaps back into focus.

“Honey, you did amazing. We’re so proud of you,” she says, no longer any hints of fear in her smile, just beaming happiness. “When do you start? Do you know your schedule yet?”

Nymphadora, completely oblivious to her mum’s emotional distress, sighs exaggeratedly before taking one parent's hand in each of her own and dragging them both towards the kitchen.

Probably already looking for a snack. They discovered a long time ago that her appetite dramatically increased whenever she used her metamorphmagus abilities.

“Extra colours require extra calories,” an eight year old Nymphadora would say, rapidly flipping her hair through the colours of the rainbow while simultaneously eating two sandwiches at once.

A couple years later Charlie Weasley, her newly appointed best friend at Hogwarts, would ask “Do you really need two sandwiches?” to which she would respond, “If I had a third arm, I’d have three sandwiches. But I can’t figure out how to do that yet, so I’m sticking to two for now.” Charlie, being the astute eleven year old that he was, would simply nod and return to eating his singular sandwich.

“I get two weeks off for *rest time* and then I start officially,” she finally responds after devouring two helpings of curry and reaching for her third apple. She scrunches her nose around *rest time,* as if to say that *rest time* is ridiculous.

“I’ll probably be working almost everyday after that.” Nymphadora is practically vibrating out of her chair with excitement, until she actually is vibrating out of her chair and running out the door again, nearly tripping on the doorsill on the way.

“Thanks for the food! I’ll see you later! I gotta go tell Charlie before he disappears back to Romania,” she exclaims with a dramatic eye roll and disappears in a flash of pink hair and combat boots.

Ted Tonks turns to his wife frozen beside him, and tenderly takes her hand in his.

“You think she’ll be alright?” he hears his wife ask quietly, clutching his hand tightly in her own. She’s tensely staring at the space where their daughter had disappeared moments before.

“Yes, I’m sure she’ll be fine. She’s a smart girl. Likes to get in trouble a lot, but also knows how to get herself out of it.” He wraps his arms solidly around his wife’s shorter frame and kisses her frizzy auburn curls. He pulls back slightly to peek at her apprehensive face.

“But will you be alright?” he asks looking down at her with concern, his sandy blonde hair falling into his warm hazel eyes.

“Yes, I’ll be alright,” Andromeda Tonks responds. She turns in his arms, stopping to look up at him. She reaches up and lovingly pushes the fringe away from her husband’s eyes.

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A ten year old Andromeda clambers down the stairs, shouting hysterically as she goes.

“Mother! There’s something wrong with Thebe! She’s not moving!” In her arms lies a scraggly silvery grey owl with white stripes across its wings. Its large head is nestled into the crook of Andromeda’s elbow as she jostles her way downstairs.

There’s the distinct sound of small running feet and then Narcissa's blonde head pokes around the corner to look up at Andromeda scrambling down the last flight of stairs.

“Andy, what’s wrong? Why’s Thebe like that?” she says, noticing the grey lump in her sister’s arms.

“I don’t know. I think she’s sick,” replies the middle sister, hurriedly carrying the limp owl into the sitting room, the warmest room in the drafty Black mansion that also happens to be
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the predetermined center for family activity.

“Where’s Mother, where’s Father?” Andromeda hastily places Thebe, the family owl, on the hideously upholstered loveseat with Narcissa worriedly hovering behind her.

“Father took Bella on a walk in the garden. Mother has a headache again; she went to get her special pain potions,” Narcissa replies, just as their Mother appears in the doorway, hastily setting something on the floor behind her and shoving it behind the sofa out of sight.

Andromeda gestures frantically towards their mother, beckoning her to approach the loveseat with an unmoving blob of fur laying across it.

“Mother, what’s wrong with Thebe? She flew in my window and I started petting her, but then—but then she stopped moving!” says Andromeda, on the verge of tears.

Their mother comes up to hug Andromeda and kiss the top of her frizzy auburn curls.

“Oh sweetie,” she says consolingly, “Thebe is over twenty years old. Sometimes when owls get old and weak, they just get sick.”

“She’ll get better, right?” Andromeda asks desperately, looking at her mother with pleading eyes.

“No, honey. I don’t think she will.” Her mother grimaces slightly.

“NOOO, she has to get better!” Andromeda shouts shrilly, jumping forward and releasing herself from her mother’s arms. She moves to smooth the feathers on the ruffled silver head, and lightly traces the ring of black and white bowtie-looking feathers around its neck.

“Is she dead?” a new voice intones from the doorway sounding bored. Bellatrix sweeps into the sitting room and comes to stand behind her Mother and sisters clustered around the sick grey owl.

“No, she’s not dead!” Andromeda screeches angrily at her, moving to block her older sister from approaching the loveseat.

“Not yet,” Bellatrix replies nastily, “but she’ll be dead soon.”

“BELLATRIX!” their mother interrupts, a disappointed scowl on her flushed pink face. “That is not appropriate to say when your sister is upset. Go get your father from the garden.”

“I don’t want to,” says Bellatrix with an equally harsh scowl aimed at her mother, her narrowed eyes peeking through her riotous black curls. “You get him.”

“Fine,” replies her mother, too annoyed to argue further, already worn out from their squabble at dinner about her eldest daughter’s failing grades.

She turns back to Andy with a forced placid expression and tries to say soothingly, “Andy, honey. It’s okay if Thebe’s ready to die. Sometimes it’s just their time.”

Andromeda, who is anything but soothed, starts to cry loudly with large fat tears rolling down her cheeks. Her mother tries to hug her again, but she shrugs away, crouching down and hiding her face in the armrest of the loveseat.

“How does she know it’s time?” comes Narcissa’s voice from the corner, where she had been surreptitiously watching the other members of her family bicker.

“Well…” says their Mother, gratefully taking the change of topic and any way to avoid her daughter’s tears. She sways over to Narcissa’s corner.

Bellatrix takes this moment of their mother’s distraction to scoot closer to the loveseat, trying to get a better look at the unconscious ball of fluff.

“Why do you care so much?” she asks her crying sister rather unkindly.

“You don’t care at all that Thebe’s sick,” Andromeda says through her tears.

“And what if I don’t?” Bellatrix asks defensively. “It’s only an owl; we can buy a new one tomorrow.”

“It’s not the same. It won’t be Thebe.”

“Any owl can deliver mail. It doesn’t have to be Thebe.”

“But I want Thebe.”

“You care too much,” Bellatrix says dismissively. “You shouldn’t care so much about things that are already dead, or very nearly dead.” She turns away and bounds up the stairs to her room in a huff.

Andromeda refuses to leave the sitting room that night. Her mother tries to convince her to let the house elves handle it before retiring for the evening, but she stubbornly refuses. Her father drops in sometime later, giving her a consoling pat on the head, then locking himself in his rooms. Narcissa stays with her lounging on an arm of the loveseat until she drifts off and almost rolls onto Thebe in her sleep; she shoos her younger sister off to bed soon after.

Pain. A feeling a crippling loss in the center of her chest. It feels like a part of her very being is being ripped forcefully from her grasp. *How does Bellatrix not care at all about losing Thebe when it hurts so much?*

Panic. A feeling of utter hopelessness. *What is she supposed to do without Thebe? What does she do after?* They’ll definitely get a new family owl, but she doesn’t know if she’ll ever be able to love it the same way. There was only ever one Thebe.

The middle Black sister takes a blanket and carefully wraps it around her owl’s limp form. She has the house elves light a fire, and places a bowl of water and bacon pieces sitting next to the sleeping grey owl. She curls up on the sofa across the room and cries, with an echo of Bellatrix’s words ringing in her head and a nearly dead owl her only company.

You shouldn't care so much… about things that are already dead… things that are dead… already dead… dead…

You care too much…

Thebe, the prestigious owl to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, is dead by sunrise. Andromeda doesn't immediately notice, having drifted off in the early morning to the eery light of a gibbous moon.

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The Floo chimes.

"Dromeda, are you there?" Ted's sandy blonde head materializes in the fireplace as he calls into the cozy cottage. Andromeda quickly discards the rest of her unread newspaper and hastily makes her way to the sitting room.

"Yes, what is it?" she asks, coming to kneel in front of her husband's head, floating amidst luminous green flames.

"I just heard from Dirk about a massive raid gone sideways. He said it's all the goblins have been talking about since this morning. Apparently a couple of Aurors were put in the hospital; I think one of them may be our Dora."

"WHAT—Why haven't we been contacted? I'm leaving for St. Mungo's right now!" She jumps up from her perch in front of the fireplace and whirls about the room, summoning her coat and shoes as she does.

"Love, I'm sure it's not that serious." Her husband watches her anxiously flit about the room. "I need to finish some things at the office. Shouldn't take more than half an hour. I'll meet you there," he says. "Please try to take some deep breaths until I get there. It wouldn't help Dora if you fainted before getting to see her. Alright?"

"Yes, alright," she agrees impatiently. "I'm leaving now."

"Okay, I'll see you soon," replies her husband. "Love you," he says as his face vanishes from the green flames, but Andromeda is already gone.

"Where is my daughter!?" Andromeda barges into the St. Mungo's waiting room, auburn hair frizzling around her. "Nymphadora Tonks, where is she?" she demands of the young receptionist, who is trembling behind the check-in desk.

A Healer in lime-green robes pauses in walking by.

"Miss Tonks, Room 232, the Magical Ailments and Diseases Ward," she says before returning her attention to the clipboard poised in her hand and briskly walking away.

Heart pounding, face sweating, lungs burning, Andromeda hurriedly jostles her way upstairs.

"Ow, bugger," she hears from a room down the corridor. She charges into the room.
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“Dora! What happened!?” she yells at her daughter, who is laying corpse-like on the hospital bed in the middle of the room, her mousy brown hair laying limply across the pillow. Her normally beige skin now a worrying ashen grey. The lower half of her body is covered by a blood stained sheet. The Healers surrounding the bed, scatter upon Andromeda’s approach.

“Ugh, Mum—I told them not to contact you,” her daughter groans. “I’m fine. A knife nicked me in the leg is all.” She waves vaguely towards her lap.

“If that’s all then why aren’t you in Artefact Accidents? Why did they move you all the way to the Magical Bugs Ward?” she interrogates her daughter. “And where is the rest of your team? Why is no one here with you?”

Nymphadora pouts sheepishly. “I may have been the only one nicked by this *specific* knife. The Healers also may have thought I was contagious, so they sent everyone else away. They’re all downstairs.”

“But I promise, I’m not contagious. It was just a scratch,” she adamantly protests, wincing slightly as she shifts on the bed, attempting to sit up.

“Dora, honey, what happened?” Andromeda says more gently.

Her heart is still beating wildly and her breaths come in short quick pants. Her head is dangerously spinning. She comes to sit on the corner of her daughter’s bed, careful not to shift her further.

“You know how I’ve been working on this high-profile burglary case for a while?” begins her injured daughter. “We finally found where they’ve been hiding the stolen artefacts, and we were staking out the place today when everything went topside,” she animatedly explains, grabbing her mum’s hand while she talks. “It turns out the thieves were a group of goblins who defected from Gringotts and wanted to ‘rightfully’ take back all the goblin-made artefacts that wizards have ‘stolen’ from them over the centuries.”

“But how did you get injured?” she interrupts her daughter’s fascinated ramblings.

“Oh that. Yes, well… During the skirmish one of the goblins came up and slashed my leg. I didn’t think much of it at the time, but the wound won’t stop bleeding so the knife—probably also goblin-made, the clever buggers—must have been enchanted. The Healers thought it might be contagious because Dawlish got a cut on the arm and it wouldn’t stop bleeding until they dragged him away from my room.”

She lowers her voice covertly. “But I happen to know he’s on special potions that increase blood flow”—she wiggles her eyebrows—“You know, especially blood flow to a certain area that his wife has a strong preference for.”

Andromeda is torn between baffled amusement and anxiety-ridden scolding at her daughter’s ill-timed humour.

At that moment Ted enters the room and rushes to his daughter’s bedside. He takes her other hand, the one not already occupied by his wife.

“Wotcher, Dad,” greets Nymphadora, casual as can be, not appearing in the slightest to have been recently talking about a fellow Auror’s blood flow problems.

“Oh, Dora, are you alright?” he asks concerned, his patient voice steady with easy affection. “I wish you would have told us,” he mildly chastises.

Their daughter rolls her eyes. “I’m fine,” she says again in an exasperated tone. “You would have worried too much over nothing, like you’re doing now.” She looks at her mum pointedly.

Andromeda squeezes her hand tightly in response, painfully tight. Nymphadora glowers down at their clasped hands, but doesn’t say anything more.

“What happens next?” her dad says in the tense silence.

“They’re running some tests now. Best case scenario, they’ll find out what enchantment was placed on the knife then they’ll know which spell to use to stop the bleeding, and I can go home tonight. Worst case scenario, they don’t find out anything and they’ll have to cut my leg off.” She shrugs nonchalantly.

Her mum is horrified; she starts to tremble, still sitting on the bed.

Her daughter notices her shaking hands and quickly says, “Mum, I’m joking. They wouldn’t really do that. The worst that could happen is I have to wear a special bandage to hold the cut together for a bit while they figure out a cure. As long as the blood loss is taken care of, there’s nothing to worry about.”

She looks over to her dad with a gleeful sparkle in her eyes. “Wouldn’t that be funny though, if both Mad-Eye and I were to lose a leg? Like mentor, like mentee, yeah?”

Her dad allows the crack of a smile to show on his face before sliding off and his face shows fatherly concern once again.

It is not the worst case scenario, as Andromeda fears, yet she still refuses to leave the hospital room. She refuses to sleep, not wanting to miss any changes to her daughter’s condition. She refuses to eat, until Ted physically shoves a biscuit in her mouth, and doesn’t release his hold over her mouth and nose until she chews and swallows.

This is worse than seventh year when she had ignored everything but studying for her NEWTs at the end of term. Ted had snuck into the Slytherin common room and brushed her unruly curls after she had forgotten to shower for an entire week. She spends the time in the hospital switching between restlessly pacing by her daughter’s bed and sitting with Ted’s head in her lap, methodically carding her fingers through his sandy blonde hair.

Nymphadora is cured and released three days later. As they leave the hospital, she takes one parent's hand in each of her own. Her hair is a lighthearted bubblegum pink again.

She looks at her mum and says jokingly, “Mum, you look even worse than I do, and I’m the one who was injured.”

Her mum only gives an exhausted nod in response. The small family of three returns home to their cozy cottage in the woods.

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A loud crash reverberates in the peaceful evening air. The Tonks hastily throw open the front door to their cozy cottage and dart outside.

"Who's there? Is it Potter? Are you Harry Potter?" Ted calls into the night, the shining quarter moon the only source of light in the foreboding darkness.

He hears his wife's shout from across the yard. "They've crashed. Ted! Crashed in the garden!"

Running towards the garden, he can see his wife bending over a thin drenched figure on the ground. In the nearby pond, a wrecked motorbike gurgles under the surface. Next to the smaller figure is a great dark mass, laying unmoving in the cold grass.

"It's them. I'm sure of it," Andromeda says upon his approach.

"Revelio," says her husband, waving his wand. "Best to be sure." The dark figures remain unchanged.

They gingerly levitate the two unconscious bodies inside, settling one on the sitting room sofa and the other in the adjacent guest bedroom.

"I'll take care of Hagrid. His injuries will be harder to fix," Andromeda says to her husband. She retreats into the bedroom and sets to work casting diagnostic spells on Hagrid's tall form, half falling off the modest sized bed.

"Rennervate," she says, pointing her wand at the large body sprawled before her. Hagrid jolts awake, frantic.

"Where's 'Arry?" he asks immediately.

"He's safe just outside this door. My husband is with him." she tells him. "Now stay still while I patch you up. You need to tell me if anything feels wrong."

She's just finished casting an *episkey* on his nose when she hears murmured voices coming from the sitting room. With a great heave, Hagrid struggles off the bed and yanks open the bedroom door, nearly taking it off its hinges.

"Harry!" she hears him gratefully shout. She follows him into the sitting room, only to look into the enraged expression of the one and only Harry Potter, his untidy jet-black hair sticking up in agitated disarray, his startling green eyes contrasting sharply with his deep golden brown skin.

"What happened to our daughter?" she asks, as she moves into the room. "Hagrid said you were ambushed; where is Nymphadora?"
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"I don't know," says Harry shamefaced. "We don't know what happened to anyone else."

She and her husband exchange looks. “I’m here. We’ll get through this together,” his look says. She doesn’t know what her look says besides sheer dread.

"Dora'll be ok, Dromeda," says Ted. "She knows her stuff, she's been in plenty of tight spots with the Aurors.” He knows her so well; his verbal reassurance calms her slightly.

She waits impatiently while Ted sends off their guests via Portkey, nervously pacing the length of the sitting room.

He returns and walks towards her, palms facing up in a placating gesture, as if approaching a skittish animal. He finally reaches her and wraps his arms solidly around her shorter frame. He kisses her frizzy auburn curls, then pulls back slightly to study her panicked face.

“Will you be alright?” he asks looking down at her with alarmed concern.

“No, not this time, not if something happens to Dora,” Andromeda responds miserably, breathing heavily and clenching her arms stiffly around herself. She honestly doesn’t know what she would do if something happens to her daughter, if she’ll be alright.

The six words burn inside her, threatening to engulf her in painful flames. She knows they are undeniably true as she looks up into her husband’s warm hazel eyes and utters them aloud.

“I can not live without her.”

Chapter End Notes

> And Harry finally graces us with his presence! Albeit fleetingly. He’ll be making more appearances in upcoming chapters. Also, brief reference to a Disney movie, because my roommate is obsessed and made me rewatch it recently.

Andromeda & Bellatrix

Chapter Summary

When the fam forgets you at home. *Home Alone,* witches edition.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Floo chimes.

“Mrs. Tonks, are you there?” Charlie Weasley’s bright red head materializes in the fireplace as he calls into the darkened cottage. Andromeda quickly discards the rest of the uneaten baby formula and hastily makes her way to the sitting room.

“What happened?” she asks, coming to crouch in front of Charlie’s floating head. “Please tell me she’s alright,” she begs him.

He doesn’t answer her plea. “May I come through?” he says instead.

She steps aside as he twirls out of the fireplace and lands with a graceful flurry of ash. She looks at his tattered dirt-stained clothing, his hunched shoulders, his puffy red-rimmed eyes.

She knows, without her daughter’s best friend saying a single word. She knows.

The back of her neck prickles; her heart pounds a thunderous uneven rhythm. She wills it to not be true, wills this to all be a terrible, terrible dream. She watches as a single tear escapes Charlie’s devastated eyes and trickles down his face before meeting the stubble on his chin.

Her rapid shallow breaths cause her head to spin dangerously. She falls to the floor violently sobbing, clutching her chest as she’s overcome by an ache so excruciatingly powerful that she bowls over with the force of it. It doesn’t matter if You-Know-Who has lost; she doesn’t care, for she has lost everything.

If tears are a colour, her tears are a harsh venomous black, anguished and cruel. Her pitch black tears drop into her lap, and dye her ratty trousers. They soak into the plush carpet, and dot its worn surface. They smear her shaking hands, and leave stains under her nails. They mark her sitting room with agonizing grief and heart-breaking desperation.

If tears are a colour, her tears are the desolate colour of suffocating darkness, the absolute absence of light… but tears have no color.

Charlie remains silent as he kneels beside her on the ground. He reaches over and grasps her trembling hand in his strong warm ones. Though his breathing remains steady, noiseless tears

stream down his scarred face. He doesn't bother wiping them away.

They remain clasped together until her sobs quiet and her breathing slows. Her heart continues to throb uneasily.

"I need to see her," Andromeda finally says, rising shakily to her feet.

"Alright," says Charlie, looking steadily at her from watery eyes.

"Can you watch Ed while I'm gone?" she asks him. She hasn't dared to leave little Teddy's side for the past month, but the danger has passed, and she trusts Charlie could handle it. The one in the most danger now is her, in danger of uncontrollably unraveling.

"Of course," he replies. She gives his hand in hers a brief squeeze before Flooing to Hogwarts and leaving her infant grandson behind.

As soon as she sees the halo of pink hair laying motionless next to a man in shabby robes, she knows. In the darkest depths of her shrivelling heart she knows that Bellatrix was the reason for her undoing.

She remembers when she used to race her older sister on their brooms, when she was only a growing second year and her older sister seemed like an overbearing fifth year. She remembers the promise Bellatrix made, even then.

"Last one to the trees has to eat all the leftovers," Andromeda says, sidling up on her broom and floating next to her older sister. Last night when she had snuck into the kitchen for a snack, she had sorted through the entire box of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans and only eaten her favorites. She knows only the disgustingly awful flavours are left; her sister knows this too.

"Fine," replies Bellatrix, wrinkling her nose in distaste. Being three years older, she isn't too concerned about losing her younger sister's stupid bet.

"On my mark," says the eldest Black sister getting into position. She leans forward on her broom, and grips the handle tightly. The middle Black sister also adjusts her position, readying herself. "Ready, set—"

Andromeda zooms ahead, throwing a just opened chocolate frog at her sister's head. It soars through the air and lands with a satisfying squelch on her sister's face.

Bellatrix shrieks. She releases her tight grip, and attempts to bat the squirming frog away. Her broom lilts drastically and veers towards the ground. The frog hops from her face and lands in her curly black hair. She aggressively yanks it from her hair and flings it into the nearby grass. She angrily rights her broom and chases after her younger sister, who is speeding away laughing loudly.

Andromeda crosses the treeline with an elated "Whoop!" called into the air. Bellatrix flies up behind her, hurtling towards her at top speed. She barely has enough time to swerve out of the way before her older sister is upon her, furious.

“No more playing fair,” Bellatrix fumes.

“Next time… I will destroy you,” she vows, black eyes glinting. She storms back into the house, leaving Andromeda to circle the field alone.

She kneels next to her daughter and takes her hand; her hand is cold and stiff, unmoving. Nymphadora is normally never able to stay still, her fingers always tapping a light rhythm or feet shuffling to an unheard beat. The stiffness is wrong. Andromeda drops the hand and hastily steps away.

A head of curly red hair comes up behind her. She turns slightly, acknowledging the other’s presence but not taking her eyes off of the body on the ground.

“Bella did this,” she says, addressing Molly Weasley beside her, hard steel creeping into her tone. It isn’t a question, but she gets an answer anyway.

“Yes.”

“Is she…?” she trails off. *Is she what?* Still here, on her way to Azkaban, as mad as her master... injured... dead? There’s only one answer she cares about.

“Yes,” Molly says again, a fierce light in her eye. Andromeda takes note: Molly is the one who dealt the final blow.

“Thank you,” she says sincerely. She has no words to convey the depth of her gratitude, the debt that she owes Molly for avenging her daughter when she couldn’t. She belatedly looks around at the other bodies littering the Great Hall. She notices the body of a boy with vivid red hair laying a few feet away; the rest of the Weasleys are hovering around him.

“I’m sorry,” she says to Molly. Sorry for the loss of her child; sorry that she could not be there to prevent it; sorry for her newborn grandson, orphaned in the course of one evening.

“It’s over now,” Molly says determinedly, wiping away tears from her eyes. She gives Andromeda a brief hug and walks back towards her waiting family, leaving Andromeda standing alone.

“It’s never really over,” she mumbles when Molly is too far away to hear, unthinkingly twisting round and round the smooth white stone on her fourth finger.

Andromeda turns to leave, not wishing to spend more time amongst the dead. Her daughter is no longer here. There is no use in staying to watch others mourn people she doesn’t know or care about.

On her way out she spots a pair of round glasses set under a head of untidy jet-black hair. He’s sitting tiredly at the far end of the hall, flanked by a lanky red-haired boy and a bushy-haired girl. They’re huddled together in intense conversation, but the relaxed set of their brushing shoulders indicate how relieved they are that the battle is finally won.

As if sensing her gaze, his eyes snap up and immediately find hers.

Pain etched into every line of her being, she looks into the exhausted face of Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived while others did not.

He stares back at her with his startling green eyes, the same unnerving green as the curse that ended her.

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Time passes slowly up here in the mountains. We sit beside bridges and walk beside fountains.

And catch the wild fishes that swim in the streams. Time passes slow when you're lost in a dream.

Andromeda switches off the radio.

The crackling song abruptly stops, and the frosty sitting room is filled with a bitter silence.

She sits in the frigid cottage and stares vacantly at the empty fireplace. She hasn't lit a proper fire in months. She couldn't bear seeing the warm smolder of the pink and orange flames or the luminous green of the Floo.

Her cold hands are empty, having let her wand fall to the dusty floor some time ago. Her feet are bare, having forgotten to put on shoes or socks with nowhere to go. Her ring is long abandoned somewhere in the earthy depths of the overgrowing garden.

A memory floats behind her emotionless eyelids, dancing across her vision.

Ted switches on the radio.

He fiddles with the dials before leaving it on a slow, melodic tune. He settles on the ground beside her and pillows his head in her lap. She unthinkingly cards her fingers through his sandy blonde hair.

They listen to the Muggle singer croon a wistful song on the charmed radio.

"This song came out last year," Ted says into the empty classroom. "A lot of people think it's just another song about peaceful living and lazy days in the mountains, but it's actually more interesting than that."

She loves when Ted goes on his fascinated ramblings. His intense focus and animated expressions during his tangents spark a flaming fondness in her. She continues stroking his hair as he talks.

"The singer seems to be content with their slow mundane life, calling it a 'dream' even. But later in the song the 'dream' seems to be something they can't escape instead of something they actually want."

"Wouldn't that be a nightmare then?" Andromeda asks.
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“I don’t think it’s as drastic as that. It’s more like… the longer they’re up there in the mountains, the more they settle into passive complacency until eventually they’re drifting through life unhappily,” he says thoughtfully. “It’s sad when you think about it, really… it’s like they’re waiting for something more… but don’t know what or how to get it.”

“Why not just move away from the mountains?” she asks curiously. Ted barks a laugh at that, his amused eyes twinkling up at her.

She loves his hazel eyes when they gaze warmly at her, when he’s paying attention to no one but her. She smiles down at his moonlit face.

“That would solve everything, wouldn’t it?” he agrees, nodding slightly, his head brushing her lap.

“Hmm,” he continues, getting distracted by the feel of her fingers in his hair. “We should suggest it to the writer for their next song.”

“I’ll remind you,” she promises, letting her hand stray from his hair and drift down to lightly smooth over his dimpling cheeks.

Ted suddenly surges up from her lap, twisting his head slightly, and gives her a tender kiss on the lips. Startled, Andromeda stares wide-eyed at his face so close to hers. No matter how many times they kiss, Ted can still surprise her with his easy affection. He quickly pulls away and scoots back down to rest his head in her lap again.

She loves *him,* she realizes, as she returns to carding her fingers through his shaggy hair.

Navy indigo tears trickle from her eyes as she stares into the deadened fireplace. They fall mercilessly down her face and onto the hard floor, spattering it in deep ocean azure. They leave endless trails of midnight blue as they sorrowfully freeze in the ice-cold room.

Andromeda switches on the radio.

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Once I had a sweetheart, he was fine and good lookin'. We sat in the kitchen while my mama was cookin'.

And stared out the window to the stars high above. Time passes slow when you're searchin' for love.

Harry barges into the frigid cottage, not bothering to knock. He has a key.

He checks the armchair in front of the fireplace. Empty. He noses his way into the kitchen. Empty. He cautiously pokes his head into the doorway of the master bedroom. Empty.

Gradually becoming more anxious, he circles back to the frosty sitting room. He double checks the lone armchair in front of the fireplace. Still empty. He glances out the window and spots a solitary figure in the garden.
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He heads to the garden and hesitantly comes to a stop next to Andromeda. She is standing in ratty trousers and a wrinkled button up much too large for her bony frame; her pale feet are bare. Her head of unbrushed auburn curls is tilted toward the sky, though the evening is cloudy and no moon is visible. Her frail arms are wrapped tightly around her chest.

“Come inside,” he says to her, extending his hand. She takes it and they walk inside the small cottage into the abandoned sitting room.

Harry takes out his wand and with a practiced swish flames burst up in the empty grate. His deep golden brown skin flickers in the shimmering light.

“I’ll get dinner ready,” he says, leaving her by the lonely armchair and disappearing into the kitchen.

He hears the slam of a door and a loud crash from the master bedroom; he sighs tiredly and listens intently. When he hears the padding of soft footsteps and indistinct muttering through the wall, he minutely relaxes and continues stirring the pot on the stove.

Andromeda emerges from the bedroom fully dressed in a simple Muggle jumper and jeans. Although her frizzy hair remains hopelessly tangled, she’s managed to tie it back in a low ponytail.

She glances around the kitchen at the items Harry has haphazardly set aside. Not spotting her desired object, she nabs two glasses from the cabinet above the sink and a bottle of vinegar from the counter by Harry’s side. Taking out her wand she sits at the table, fills the two glasses to the brim, and painstakingly turns the vinegar into a glistening crimson liquid.

Harry lets out an exasperated huff. “I thought you said you were going to quit, so I didn’t bring any this time,” he says, eyeing the overflowing glass of red liquid in front of Andromeda.

“I changed my mind,” she says, moving her wand to hover over the second glass.

“I see,” he says in a carefully flat voice, rolling some type of meat into a circular shape.

They sit at the table in the cozy kitchen and eat the homemade meal made by the one and only Harry Potter. She had tried to assist him the first time he insisted on coming over and feeding her, but he had batted her wand away with a “Don’t worry about it, my relatives used to make me cook for them all the time.” She had been secretly relieved, however. Growing up with an army of house elves meant she never could tell the difference between a teaspoon and a tablespoon.

Later, Ted would block off the kitchen claiming her cooking skills to be atrocious and peck her on the forehead consolingly. She never realized the real reason Ted forbade her from cooking, that he loved to watch her face light up whenever she took the first bite of his food; he loved it so much that he strived to cook every meal for her.

“How are things with Ginny?” asks Andromeda, failing to stab a meatball on her plate.

“It’s been difficult recently,” he begins to say. “With the one year anniversary of the battle coming up, I’ve been having a lot of nightmares. Gin says it’s making me more cranky and irritable than usual. Her Mind Healer told her I’m emotionally unavailable.”

He pokes despondently at his food, twisting and untwisting the long strands of pasta around his fork. He lifts his glass and takes a large gulp of red liquid.

“And what does *your* Mind Healer say?”

Harry snorts into his glass and comes up coughing.

“I stopped seeing mine ages ago. He was a load of bollocks, kept telling me to journal about my trauma instead of bottling it all up inside me like a ticking time bomb.”—he slams a hand down on the table—“I’m not about to start a bloody journal! Not after what happened with Riddle’s diary… I just won’t.”

He takes his hand off the table, embarrassed by his sudden outburst.

“Sorry,” he mutters, eyes cast down at his barely touched plate.

“I think you should go see a Mind Healer again,” she says, nonchalantly sipping from her glass and ignoring her guest’s momentary lapse into anger.

He looks up from his plate and glares at her stonily.

“I’ll go back when you do,” he says, voice hard.

“Touché,” she replies, and raises her glass for a toast, but notices at the last moment that it’s empty. “We need more wine.”

Several glasses of wine later, Harry is swaying in his seat. Andromeda has already given up staying upright and rests her head on the table, pillowed in her willowy arms.

“Where does the wine keep coming from?” he slurs, struggling to concentrate on the glass in his hand. He seems to be holding 2 cups in his 3 hands, but no, that can’t be right. He looks over at Andromeda’s 2 heads resting on the table. Nope, that's definitely too many heads.

Andromeda responds from the crook of her elbow, her voice muffled by her jumper.

“I kept duplicating the bottle of vinegar before turning it into wine. That’s why the quality has significantly decreased with the last few glasses. I wouldn’t be surprised if the last one was pure alcohol with no wine taste at all.” She waves a thin hand vaguely in the direction of the transformed vinegar.

“Brilliant!” Harry exclaims, taking a sip of what is most definitely pure ethanol.

He bangs his glass down on the table, shattering it accidentally.

“Oh Merlin, I’m so sorry,” he apologizes, seeming horrified by his own strength. He fumbles with his wand to cast a cleaning spell, but before he can mumble the incantation, Andromeda

lazily waves a drooping hand and mutters a *scourgify* and *reparo,* clearing away the spill and fixing the glass.

Harry gapes at her, his wine-addled mind taking longer than usual to process this exciting revelation.

“That was wandless magic!” he says surprised.

“Yes,” she says, lifting her head from the crook of her arm. There is a slight crease on her right cheek. “You didn’t think my dear sister was the only powerful one in the family, did you?” She glances disinterestedly at the table and the cleaned up spill. “I also happen to have a knack for cleaning charms.”

“Wow,” is his drunken mind’s highly intelligent answer.

Sitting upright in her chair again, Andromeda picks up her wand and indifferently moves it through a series of loops and sweeps. The plates, glasses, and silverware fly to sink, instantly scrubbing themselves clean then putting themselves away in the cupboard; the pots and pans follow suit. A towel floats over to the counters wiping them down. A broom emerges from the hallway and sweeps under the table; she politely lifts her feet for it. The chairs at the table straighten abruptly, jerking Harry along with them.

“Wow,” Harry says again, looking around at the animated household items.

“I just haven’t felt the need to clean in a while,” she says, ignoring the whirlwind of activity around them.

“I think you should take Teddy back in,” he says suddenly. Andromeda freezes.

“Mrs. Weasley really doesn’t mind looking after him”—he rushes to assure her—“but it’s been almost an entire year, and you *are* his grandmother,” he finishes nervously, eyeing the wand still in her hand.

“What about you? You’re his godfather,” she says defensively, lowering her wand back to the table.

“I’m only 18! I can’t take care of a baby right now; I can barely take care of myself.”

“I was only 19 when I had Dora.”

He gives her an unimpressed stare.

Ignoring the throbbing pain in her chest whenever she thinks about her daughter, she continues, “And I’m currently over twice your age and can still barely put my shoes on the right feet.”

He glances down at her feet, perplexed. She lifts a foot from under the table and wiggles it experimentally. Indeed, her shoes are on the wrong feet. Harry bursts into surprised laughter with Andromeda soon following. It feels good to laugh, her whole being shaking with hysterical giggles.

It’s so good it’s painful.

Dusky bronze tears prickle at the corner of her crinkled eyes. They shimmer in the low light, radiating a soft pulsing glow, the same golden hue of Harry’s deep brown skin. They linger on her eyelashes and cloud her vision until the kitchen blurs into one large collage of mixing colours.

They’re both laughing and crying unashamedly by the time the hiccuping has subsided, and they can breathe again.

“Mrs. Tonks, but seriously though, Teddy would—”

“Harry, really, we’re family now. Call me Andy.”

“Okay… Andy,” he says, staring at her searchingly and recognizing the stubborn tilt of her head, the same as her daughter. He drops the topic.

After some of the wine has worn off and the kitchen has stopped spinning, Harry stands in front of the roaring fireplace, Floo powder ready to be thrown into the flames.

“About Teddy… ” he starts to say, shifting his weight and staring at Andromeda earnestly.

“Think about it, please.”

The same words Ted, her Ted, had said to her back in an empty classroom, folding a black jewelry box into her hand.

He steps into the flames, and vanishes in a flash of green.

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Ain't no reason to go in a wagon to town. Ain't no reason to go to the fair.

Ain't no reason to go up, ain't no reason to go down. Ain't no reason to go anywhere.

“Gran, watch me!”

She watches a small turquoise head speed away from her down the narrow sidewalk, and promptly fall sideways.

“Ed!” she calls out worriedly, sprinting to his side. He bops up energetically, discarding the small bike next to him.

“Did ya sthee that?” he asks her excitedly, oblivious to Andromeda checking his arm over for scratches. “That was almoth five theconds!” his missing front teeth causing him to have an adorable lisp.

“Are you hurt anywhere?” she demands, spinning him around and checking the back of his scrawny legs.
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“Nuh ugh.” He adamantly shakes his head.

“Honey, you have to be more careful,” she mildly chastises. She searches the ground next to the bike. “Where is your helmet? Did you banish it again?” she asks, looking at her grandson sternly.

“I dunno,” he says, averting his eyes and shrugging his shoulders.

She heaves an exasperated sigh. This will be the third one this week; there’s only so many extra things in the tiny cottage she can keep transfiguring into new helmets. She pulls off one of her sneakers, leaving her foot in a yellow patterned sock.

“Here.” She transforms the shoe into another helmet with a wave of her wand and hands it over to Teddy. “Now don’t banish this one. I need my shoe back.”

Her grandson giggles at her sock-clad foot, his beige cheek dimpling as he smiles. “Heh, you only got one sthoo now,” he says with his lisp.

“Yes, and I’ll have one shoe forever if you don’t give that back to me later. I’d be very disappointed if that happened.” Although, only having one shoe would be a splendid excuse for not leaving the house and skipping the socializing events that Harry frequently insists on.

“Okay,” he says solemnly and gingerly buckles the helmet onto his turquoise head, as if afraid simply touching it will cause it to disappear.

“This time, try to pedal a bit more… and don’t let go of the handlebars!” she calls after him as he cruises away from her.

Teddy is so much like Nymphadora that it both fills her with fondness and breaks her heart simultaneously. Just as rambunctious, just as curious, just as likely to cause a mess. She doesn’t remember the number of times she’s had to heal her daughter’s scrapes and bruises just from playing in the sitting room. She’d long perfected basic healing spells by the time Teddy was born.

The only thing Nymphadora had ever been scared of as a child had been learning how to ride a bicycle. Riding a broom many feet off the ground, no problem. But show her a bike with two wheels and little Nymphadora would cower in fear behind her mum, her pink hair peeking out.

“It’s a right of passage for children in the Muggle world,” her dad had said, trying to coax her out from behind her mum’s legs. “If they can figure it out, so can you. I bet it will be even easier for you. You already know how to balance on a broom.”

“Mum doesn’t know how to ride. Why do I have to?” she had said, looking beseechingly up at her parents, changing her eyes to match her father’s hazel ones and her hair to match her mother’s auburn curls, a trick that usually worked in getting an extra cookie after dinner.

“You know, love, she has a point,” Ted had said, grinning at his wife mischievously… which is how Andromeda, the second daughter to the most non-Muggle family in the wizarding

world, had been tricked by her eight year old daughter and a smug husband into learning how to ride a bike—without a balancing charm, thank you very much.

Nymphadora when she was brave enough to finally get on the bike, of course, was a natural, and was quickly riding laps around her precariously balancing mother. Ted was patient through it all and promised to kiss away any bruises or scratches acquired by his wife and daughter. Therefore, it was very unfortunate indeed when Andromeda miraculously received a vivid bruise on her collarbone, and her husband had to kiss it away later that evening.

She meanders after Teddy down the sidewalk, imagining pink hair instead of blue and kisses on her collarbone. The ache in her chest throbs.

~~~

Time passes slowly up here in the daylight. We stare straight ahead and try so hard to stay right.

Like a cloud that passes and covers the day. Time passes slow and then fades away.

Harry barges into the cramped Muggle flat, not bothering to knock. He has a key.

“I brought lunch!” he yells into the empty kitchen, unpacking a paper bag filled with an excessive number of cornish pasties and an overflowing amount of apples.

“Wotcher Harry!”

His godchild rounds the corner and trips on the mountain bike propped up against the wall. Teddy’s bright pink hair falls dashingly into large hazel eyes and contrasts starkly with deep golden brown skin. They catch their godfather in a hug before promptly snatching three pasties from the table and devouring them with relish, causing a piece to fall on their signature purple jumper with a “T” lovingly embroidered in its center. A writhing black tattoo peeks out the top of the jumper’s collar.

“How’s the move going? I see you have a lot of boxes left to sort through.”

“Good, good. I got in late last night from the trip—Uncle Charlie says hi, by the way—so I didn’t have a chance to unpack yet.”

Andromeda follows Teddy into the kitchen, patting their spiky head in passing then settling in the chair across the table.

“We would have finished more by now if I hadn’t wasted time waking up Ed here when I arrived. *Some* people slept through their alarms this morning,” she says with a look of fake annoyance at her grandchild.

“It was so *early,* ” Teddy complains around bites of food. “Why couldn’t we have started at, say, a time when normal people are awake?”

“It was only eight o’clock. The sun had been up for hours.”
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“But it’s a Saturday!”

“Stop your whinging and hand me an apple.” Andromeda gives her grandchild a stern no-nonsense look, but cracks a smile when Teddy attempts to juggle the remaining apples and fails spectacularly before handing one to her.

Harry grins bemusedly at their friendly banter.

“How’re things with Victoire? It must be hard being apart this year again,” he asks his godchild.

“It’s okay; we write almost everyday. I still miss her, but I’m planning to visit during the first Hogsmeade weekend.” Teddy reaches for the last apple.

“Yeah? That’s good. James mentioned you looked quite—er—cozy on the train platform.”

“Oh, haha,” they grin sheepishly, munching around the apple core. “He didn’t write anything in his letter a couple days ago, but he did say Al was sorted into Slytherin. How’s he doing? Uncle Ron isn’t too banged up about it, is he?”

“He’s having a rough time, but he’ll adjust soon.”

“Who? Al or Uncle Ron?”

“Both.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being in Slytherin,” Andromeda interjects, snatching the last cornish pasty from the pile and tossing it at Harry before Teddy has a chance to finish them all, and Harry would let them.

“No, of course not. But we all know Gryffindor is the best house,” he says smugly, catching the pasty deftly and taking a huge bite.

“Oh yeah? Then why is it that Gryffindor hasn’t won the Quidditch Cup since Ginny left?” Teddy raises a dark pink eyebrow in challenge.

Never one to pass up a good challenge, Harry says, “I bet… Gryffindor could beat Hufflepuff *right now.* ”

“You’re on,” Teddy says almost instantly, expecting this response. Andromeda rolls her eyes, but follows them as they grab brooms and Apparate to Harry’s backyard.

“Gran, you’re playing too,” her grandchild commands, handing her a spare broom.

She’s learned long ago not to argue with Teddy’s stubborn streak. There had been a phase at Hogwarts where her grandchild had vehemently refused to change hair colors from anything other than an obnoxiously blinding lime green, even after the professors had complained that the blinking silver streaks were distracting for the other students. Andromeda could only wait and hope that fourteen year old Teddy would grow out of that phase. Thankfully, they did… somewhat, if she considers turquoise or magenta hair much better.

Harry is already taking out the box of quidditch equipment. “I figure we could toss around the quaffle for a bit, see who gets the most goals,” he says, struggling to control one of the straining bludgers.

“I don’t want to put you at a disadvantage by releasing the snitch,” he smirks wickedly at them.

“Ha bloody ha, Harry. Just release the damn snitch,” Teddy scoffs. “Maybe *I* don’t want *you* to be disadvantaged by only using the quaffle. You do remember I used to play Chaser for my house team. And as I recall, that was much more recently than you.” They look meaningfully at Harry’s salt-and-pepper hair.

“In that case”—Andromeda cuts in briskly—“I vote to play with one bludger as well, since I also don’t want to be *disadvantaged,* ” she drawls, stopping their squabbling. She grabs the beater bats and hands one to each of them, only smacking them a little bit as she does.

They play their highly unorthodox game of quidditch long into the afternoon with Andromeda sweeping them all away. She soon discovers that the most efficient strategy is to disrupt and sabotage all of Harry’s and Teddy’s strategies. She abandons chasing the quaffle and viciously hurls the bludger at whoever does have it; this has the lovely effect of causing them to drop the ball and miss their goal… every… single… time.

The game ends when the snitch unknowingly flutters in front of Harry’s beater bat and accidentally gets whacked sideways. Its momentarily stunned wings fail to stop its arching path as it soars directly into Andromeda’s lap a few feet away; she lets out an elated “Whoop!” and does a loop in victory.

“Clearly, Slytherin is the best house and you’re both fools,” she says as they land in the grass.

“Alas, I must admit defeat. Apologies, your royal Slytherin-ness,” Teddy responds with a mock bow and tipping an imaginary hat; he flashes his hair Slytherin green for a few moments before reverting to a lighthearted pink.

“If we were all in the same house, we’d make a great team,” Harry muses, ignoring his godchild’s antics.

They return to the messy flat, sweaty and gloriously exhausted, and continue emptying and organizing the endless boxes. Harry wonders if there’s a Duplicating Charm on them for they seem to be getting more and more overwhelming by the hour. There is no way all this stuff fit in Teddy’s old room in Andy’s tiny cottage.

“I gotta head back to the Auror office for a bit,” Harry comments some time later, coming up behind Teddy and ruffling their spiky pink hair affectionately.

“But it’s a Saturday night!”

“Yeah, I know, but I left a lot of paperwork from this week to catch up on over the weekend. I need to finish it today or Gin will have my head for missing our date tomorrow… By the way, you’re still good to take Lily tomorrow afternoon, yeah?”

“Aww, that’s so cute you and Ginny still go on dates,” Teddy coos at him. Harry moves to swat his godchild's arm, but they quickly jump away snickering.

“Yeah, yeah, I said I’d take Lils tomorrow. We’ll go do a nice safe activity, like watching Flobberworms grow or something boring like that. Definitely not going to the shop and buying the largest glitter bomb they have to send to Jamie. Promise.”

“Mm-hmm,” Harry says sceptically, narrowing his eyes at his pink-haired godchild and zeroing in on their multiple piercings. The last time he had let Teddy babysit one of his children, James had come home with a new ear piercing and an attitude for days. Said godchild looks back innocently, hazel eyes wide.

He grabs his coat and moves towards the door, eyes still narrowed suspiciously at Teddy.

“Bye, Teddy!” Harry calls out as he exits the flat and bounds down the stairs. “See ya old man!” he hears faintly in response.

“Harry,” Andromeda says, following him out the door and stepping outside.

She extends her hand towards him, holding a plain large envelope. He furrows his brow perplexed at the innocuous-looking offering. Understanding draws on him and he glances up at her, his expression laced with apprehension.

“Andy, are you sure? You don’t—”

“Take it,” she insists, forcefully shoving the papers into his hand.

“Why me? Why now?”

“I wouldn't trust it to anyone else. Teddy’s on his own now; this is just a precaution.” She looks at him imploringly, begging him to understand. “Everything's already taken care of.”

Pain etched into every line of her being, she looks into the weary face of Harry Potter, the godfather to her only beloved grandchild.

He stares back at her with his startling green eyes, the same unnerving green as the curse that ended her.

He reluctantly takes the offered document and leaves.

Only a little longer. She turns around and retreats up the stairs to Teddy’s flat.

They order takeaway for dinner and Andromeda leaves a few hours later, still not finished unpacking but enough that she now feels comfortable maneuvering in the narrow hallway. Teddy walks her downstairs and envelopes her in a crushing hug, before finally pushing her out the door.

She looks back to wave at them, and is struck dumb by the sight. The lingering ache in her chest flares as she remembers.

Ted hurries out of the small cottage, rucksack packed neatly, wand tucked safely away. He reaches for his wife and kisses her fiercely, cradling her head of frizzy auburn hair in his strong hands. He pulls back slightly, and she looks into his warm hazel eyes. “I’ll be back soon, love,” he says then rushes away. At the edge of the yard, he turns back and waves at his wife standing alone in the dimly lit doorway under a crescent moon.

Nymphadora hurries out of the small cottage, a burning coin in her pocket, wand in hand. She laces up her well-worn boots then grasps her mum tightly in a crushing hug, her spiky pink hair obscuring her mum’s vision momentarily before pulling back. “I’ll be back soon, Mum,” she says then rushes away. At the edge of the yard, she turns back and waves at her mum standing alone in the dimly lit doorway under a crescent moon.

Teddy stands in the doorway in distressed combat boots and spiky pink hair. Warm hazel eyes crinkle at her over a beaming smile. They wave at her, just as they did each time back then. She turns away and leaves them standing alone in the dimly lit doorway.

Finally, it’s time. Hugging her chest tightly in her thin arms, she walks away under the new moon floating invisible in the night sky.

Andromeda lies in her bed, finished.

Many well-wishers had passed through her tiny cottage during the last few months, but they always left her eventually, even Teddy who had practically moved back in with the amount of time they spent by her bedside. She had only convinced her stubborn grandchild to return to their barely used flat for the night by bribing Victoire to visit in the middle of term.

Finally, she is alone again.

She opens the drawer next to her bed and peers inside. A simple ring sits there; she gently lifts it up and twists the white stone in her hand. She sets the ring back in the drawer and reaches for a weathered paper laying next to it.

She caresses the moving photograph in her hands of a small family of three.

Her daughter stands looking thrilled in crisp Auror robes in the middle of her two parents, her hair spiking comically on her pink head. Her husband has his arm around their daughter, beaming with happiness and looking at his family lovingly. She stands on the other side of their daughter, face flicking between expressions of joyful pride and utter terror. In the picture, she clasps and unclasps her daughter’s hands repeatedly.

Her dark red tears flow down onto the paper, splattering the photograph like a murderous crime scene, rich visceral red bleeding into every open centimeter. Her crimson tainted canvas is an aching mosaic of time passing slowly and agony never changing.

If tears are a colour, her tears are the painful colour of blood, of a hurt so deep it can never be forgotten… but tears have no colour.

She flips the paper over.

“Verbum revelio,” she murmurs at the back of it. Words slowly merge into view on the empty whiteness of the crinkled paper.

“Happy Birthday Mum! Love you lots!” Dora’s messy writing says, the last few words smeared in her haste.

“I love you more today than yesterday. Happy Birthday, Love.” Ted’s charming writing says in his endearing slanted scrawl.

She reaches into the drawer a third time and removes an elegant quill, taken from a fluffy grey owl many years ago. She signs her own message to the back of the beaten down photo, in the gaping space underneath the messages she has already memorized. The words stick to the parchment and achingly settle amongst the others.

She sets the photograph on her chest and hugs it tightly as she drifts off.

The six words linger, until the spell wears off in the early morning… as they inevitably fade away.

“I will not live without you.”

And so Death took the second sister for her own.

Chapter End Notes

That concludes Part 2! With Andromeda's struggle with depression after losing the two most important people in her life. The song quoted throughout is “Time Passes Slowly” written by Bob Dylan in 1970, but I was specifically listening to the slower melodic version sung by Judy Collins while writing this section. Ted’s message on the back of the photograph is a song by Spiral Staircase in 1969 of the same name, “I Love You More Today Than Yesterday.”

Narcissa & Andromeda

Chapter Summary

For Narcissa, a simple game of hide and seek turns into more than she bargained for.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

But though Death searched for the third sister for many years, she was never able to find her.

But though Andromeda searched for her sister for many hours, she was unable to find her.

“Cissy! You can come out now! I give up!” she yells down the long hallway. No response. The Japanese vase sitting serenely by the front door silently mocks her with its flamboyant visibility.

Where is she?

She tried asking Father if he had seen Narcissa sneaking about, but he had been too absorbed in his new novel to notice any strange happenings or small footsteps in the drafty manor. When she had asked her older sister, Bellatrix had been no help at all, directing her towards empty cupboards and dusty corners. Mother had been resting from a sudden headache, so she hadn’t tried prying open the door to the master bedroom, which would have been locked anyways.

Andromeda noisily stomps down the third floor corridor. Still no sign of a blonde braid anywhere.

She checks Narcissa’s massive wardrobe and is almost suffocated by an overflowing amount of petticoats. She peeks behind the sitting room sofa and is disappointed to find nothing but an empty glass bottle. In a last attempt, she even flips open the covers to her own bed, where her younger sister flees to during thunderstorms.

Still nothing.

Frustrated and more than a little annoyed, Andromeda bursts out the front door, Bellatrix’s new broom in her hand. If she can’t find her sister, then she mind as well practice flying while she waits for when Narcissa decides to magically reappear.

From a cramped corner by a lonely window, Narcissa watches Andromeda make slow winding loops above the tall grass. Perched on a high ledge and hidden by a thick curtain, she clings to the gaping window, her long blonde braid resting against the frosted pane as she watches the comings and goings of the house down below.

She often secludes herself in her secret alcove when she doesn't want to be found.

Given enough time, everyone forgets about her and she blends inconspicuously into the background. Andromeda always abandons her search after an hour, a few hours if she's lucky, and switches her attention to something or someone else. Bellatrix doesn't care as long as she shows up later when summoned for one task or another. Mother and Father continue on their lazy afternoons, not even noticing her absence.

Hidden in the lengthening shadows Narcissa watches as her parents dance around each other: colliding, quarreling, then retreating into their separate consolatory activities. She watches as Bellatrix accuses Andromeda of stealing her new broom, yet again, and a raucous argument starts a week-long feud between the two older Black sisters.

She watches as her father becomes reclusive and withdrawn, and her mother becomes harder and more demanding. She watches as Bellatrix refuses to bend under their influence, and Andromeda refuses to become like Bellatrix.

Out of the three sisters, Narcissa quietly watches, and emerges as the *good* daughter, the most well behaved, the one who would never say "such disgusting things to your own parents like that," and who would never disappoint the family.

Narcissa enjoys the view from her high perch by the window, silently watching others without being watched in return.

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Mrs. Black slumps into an uncomfortable-looking chair at the absurdly long dinner table.

"Stubborn infuriating child," she grouses, lifting a clear bottle with a pungent amber liquid to her lips.

As the liquid burns down her throat, she hums and slouches in her chair further, her head lolling back against the headrest. One weary hand comes up to gently massage her temple as she closes her tired eyes.

She brings the bottle to her lips again and takes a long satisfying pull. Lowering the bottle, she reluctantly cracks her eyelids open and abruptly flinches in her chair, nearly causing the bottle to slip from her uncoordinated fingers.

"Cissy, dear. You're so quiet I didn't realize you were there."

Her youngest daughter's perceptive blue eyes stare out at her from the shadow of the doorway, her alabaster skin nearly glowing in the darkness.

"Mother, what are you doing?" Narcissa says, stepping out of the doorway and into the light.

"Nothing, honey. I have a headache so I'm taking a pain potion."

"That doesn't look like a pain potion." The youngest Black daughter glowers suspiciously at the bottle in her mother's hand.
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“It’s a *special* potion, darling. Don’t worry about it.”

“Father says that’s poison.”

“Your father doesn’t need to know. He’ll just be worried that I’m having a headache again.” Her mother looks at her with a wide doe-eyed stare. “You don’t want Father to worry unnecessarily, do you?”

Narcissa considers for a short moment. Their father has already been more stressed than usual lately. She doesn’t know why, but she supposes it wouldn’t help telling him she found Mother drinking poison after dinner.

“I guess not…” she decides.

“There’s a good dear.” Her mother takes another swallow of amber liquid. “Where is your father anyways?”

“He’s in the garden with Bella.”

“Again?” Her mother’s penciled eyebrows crinkle in befuddlement. “Oh, well… Why don’t you go out and join them? Tell them to check on the roses. I think they may need pruning soon.”

“Okay…” she says, unsure.

“Excellent. Off you go then.” Her mother makes a dismissive motion with the hand not holding the bottle and closes her eyes again.

Narcissa slowly backs out of the room confused but not wanting to disobey Mother and upset her. She tiptoes out the back door and into the garden. She looks up into the cloudy evening sky; she can just make out the stars winking deviously at her before disappearing behind a drifting cloud. It’s comforting to think about the stars looking over her, even if they are hidden from view.

She wanders through the garden, half-heartedly searching for her sister and father. She doesn’t like disturbing them on their nightly walks; Bellatrix is never welcoming and her stoic father never smiles. Maybe she can go back inside and tell Mother she couldn’t find them.

“Shut up!” she hears on the path up ahead. She carefully crouches behind a neatly trimmed rose bush and peers over the top of it. What she glimpses is as baffling as it is frightening.

Her father is looming over her eldest sister, his shaking hands clutching her pale throat. His expression is one of such menacing rage that she cowers further behind the plant. But her sister is not cowering; she’s taunting their father back, her thick black curls falling into her face and shielding her eyes from Narcissa’s view.

With a harsh breath, her father brusquely pushes her sister away and clasps his hands around his own throat muttering to himself repeatedly. Bellatrix gives him a disgusted look then strides away meandering back through the garden, leaving him mumbling to the empty air.

Narcissa cautiously backs away, fading into the dark shrubbery surrounding the garden path, before whirling around and sprinting back to the house. She curls up in her perch above the window, her heart racing and hands clammy with sweat.

She hears clumsy footsteps on the stairs and Andromeda yelling hysterically. She jumps down from her ledge, wipes her sweaty palms on her dress, and runs towards the stairs, her small feet padding on the hard floor. Poking her head around the corner she sees her auburn-haired sister, clutching an immobile lump in her arms, scrambling down the last flight of stairs. They take the unconscious ball of grey fluff into the sitting room and set it on the largest loveseat.

Notified by her sister's cries, their mother appears in the doorway, wobbling slightly. She hastily sets the bottle of amber liquid on the floor behind her and shoves it behind the sofa out of sight.

"Andy, why are you yelling in the house?" she says, stumbling into the room.

The reason, in fact, that Andromeda is yelling in the house is because of a sick grey owl, possibly on its last few breaths of life. A fact that is not so considerately emphasized by Bellatrix sweeping into the room moments later with a toneless "Is she dead?" accompanying her.

Her mother tries to comfort the middle Black sister by saying soothingly, "It's okay if Thebe's ready to die. Sometimes it's just their time."

This makes no sense to Narcissa. One cannot just know when they are ready to die. *Why would someone ever accept dying willingly when they can keep on living?*

"How does she know it's time?" she says from her corner of the room, where she had been surreptitiously watching the other members of her family bicker.

Her mother sways over to her corner and stoops down in front of her, her sour breath hitting her face.

"Sometimes when they're really old or really sick, it's just their time. Thebe is very sick and also very weak. The best we can do is make her comfortable and hope that she's had a long and happy life."

"But how does she *know?* " Narcissa repeats. It still doesn't make sense that someone would just accept dying. *She would never.*

"Oh, honey." Her mother strokes her long blonde braid with clumsy fingers. "You don't have to think about that now… When it's time, when you're ready, you'll know."

"Okay…" she says sceptically. Her mother rises from her crouch and returns to a crying Andromeda by the armchair.

She stares after her teetering mother, thinking about amber liquids in glass bottles, pale hands clasped around pale throats, and grey owls ready to die.

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“Legilimens.”

There is a blistering pressure at the top of her head. It pounds and pulses, seeking entrance to the deepest darkest corners of her mind. By sheer force of will she pushes back against it. She pictures a wall of unmoving stone; each heavy stone she achingly hauls into place, gradually building the wall higher and thicker.

The foreign pressure pauses and retreats. She’s done it; she’s stopped the intrusion… or she hasn’t.

In the next instant, the scorching pressure is back. Like a well aimed bludger it sears straight through her hastily prepared wall and crashes into her thoughts. She chases after the flaming bludger, past shifting memories and blurry thoughts. But it does not slow down and it does not falter in its path as it searches deeper and deeper into her mind.

She is running, sprinting, free falling straight into a hazy memory shaded in disappointed browns and frustrated oranges.

Andromeda is on the ground before her crying amongst a pile of burned letters. She stands above her sister, her wand shaking in her hands.

“Incendio,” she says. Another paper catches fire and flutters away into ash. They fall to the floor and scatter on the carpet.

She is spinning, twirling, hurtling into melancholy blues and bleak greys.

Andromeda nods once at her then rushes out the door and into the night. She doesn’t nod back.

With stiff hands she takes out her long blonde braid and heavily treads up the stairs, away from the closed door and away from her no-longer sister.

She is struggling, gasping, and emerging in the Black family sitting room with Bellatrix lounging beside her.

“Not bad,” her older sister says, glancing approvingly at her. “You managed to clear your mind without any trouble… and actually started erecting a meager barrier as well. Once I got through, I had to search fairly deep to find any important memories… Not bad at all.”

“That was terrible.” Narcissa reaches over for the glass of water on a nearby table and takes a large gulp to calm her churning stomach. Her head throbs with the beginning of a headache.

Bellatrix gives her a wry look and tosses her voluminous black curls over her shoulder.

“The first time is always the hardest,” she says, not quite comfortingly. “The Dark Lord will be much harsher than I was. You need to be prepared for when you join us next year.”
~~~

Narcissa is both excited and terrified to finish school this year. Leaving Hogwarts will mean marrying the honorably rich Malfoy boy, moving out of the Black family manor and out from under her parents' watchful eye, and joining the Dark Lord's well renowned pure-blood cause. It's everything she's ever dreamed of: a life others would envy as they admired her from afar.

And yet, never in her wildest dreams or worst nightmares was Andromeda simply gone, not there.

"What were you looking for?" she asks her older sister.

"Your darkest secrets, the thoughts you most want to hide. That is also what the Dark Lord will look for." Narcissa is horrified by the concept of having her mind so exposed. Dark Lord or not, her secrets should be hers and hers alone.

"Why were you suppressing those memories?" her sister asks, disregarding Narcissa's momentary look of distress. "It's not as if you have to hide those from me. I already know why the blood-traitor left." She sneers nastily at the mention of their no-longer sister.

Narcissa takes her time setting the cup down before responding, "I wasn't hiding them from you specifically… I just don't like to think about them."

"Why?" Bellatrix says.

"I don't—"

"Why?" Bellatrix commands.

"Because—" Narcissa glances at her older sister who is raising one imperious eyebrow at her.

She swallows and continues, "She knew what she was doing was wrong. I told her not to continue with that stupid boy, but she didn't listen… and then she left. She left *me* for *him!* Why!?"

She clenches her hands in agitated frustration. "Why would she do that? When I told her not to… when she knew… " she trails off, looking forlornly at her half full glass of water.

"So you feel abandoned?"

"I suppose… yes"

"Don't," is her sister's brisk response. "Be angry that she left, be disappointed, but don't cry about it. She'd be better off dead than what she did to us; she's not worth the tears."

Her sister's callous words reverberate in her head. *Would Andromeda really be better off dead?* Narcissa doesn't think so. She may loathe Andromeda for abandoning her and running away from her family, but she could never be as heartless as Bellatrix and wish her dead.

And with that unsettling thought, the youngest Black sister realizes she now has the first thought to hide from her older sister when having her mind rifled through again.

Or maybe the third thought. She tries not to think about pungent amber liquids and mutterings in the garden.

Bellatrix taps her wand thoughtfully on the sofa cushion. It sparks in her hand, anticipating its next spell.

“It looks like our first task will be to compartmentalize the memories of the deceitful blood-traitor. That way it will be easier for you to ignore them and their emotions.” She adjusts the patterned lace on the sleeve of her dress, momentarily flashing the black of the Dark Mark on an ivory forearm.

“According to the many books I’ve read on the subject and”—she juts her chin out proudly —“the Dark Lord’s private lessons, it is best to create a type of organizational system for your memories. With that you can focus on or store individual memories as needed, and not have them distractingly floating about in your mind.”

“What do you use for your memories?”

“I have a garden. Each memory is a different plant in the garden, some poisonous, some not.”

“But you hate plants.”

“Just because I hate them, doesn’t mean I am oblivious to them and their usefulness.”

Bellatrix pauses, as a flash of curly red attempts to break free from its carefully potted area and wander onto the wrong path. She wrangles the memory back in and chucks it into the “Extremely Dangerous” gated section of her garden. Tangled vines reach up and grab the memory, dragging it down until it cannot escape.

She smirks in satisfaction and concentrates on her younger sister again.

“Everyone is different so choose a method specific to you. I doubt a garden would be capable of storing your thoughts properly, since you hardly know a red from a white rose. It needs to be something you can remember quite clearly and easily be able to picture. Do you have anything in mind?”

Narcissa clearly remembers tearful words written in curling script. She easily pictures black ink smearing on white parchment, inked papers violently thrown on the ground in the middle of an abandoned night.

“Letters,” she blurts out unthinkingly.

“What?”

She inhales stiffly. It’s too late to back out now. If Bellatrix wants her to use something she can clearly picture, then this is it.

“Letters,” she says again, forcing decisiveness into her tone. “I want to use letters as the method for organizing my memories.”

“Why letters?” Bellatrix frowns in confusion. “You never like responding to my letters.”

“Just because I hate them, doesn’t mean I am oblivious to them and their usefulness,” she parrots back at her older sister.

“Hmph,” Bellatrix says in mild annoyance.

She twirls her wand carelessly in her skilled fingers and responds after a few moments deep in thought.

“Not a bad idea really… you can write them and organize them however you like… yes,”—her unsettling eyes gleam at Narcissa—“letters will do quite well for you. We shall begin immediately.”

“Right now?” Narcissa squeaks. Her unstable stomach rumbles nauseatingly.

Her sister gives her an incredulous condescending stare.

“The Dark Lord will enter your mind whenever he wishes, and you *will* obey. It does not matter if you are weak. Do not embarrass me in his presence by questioning him as you just did to me.”

Her voice is harsh and demanding, yet Narcissa is not naive enough to believe that this is the worst of her sister’s reprimand. She is aware of Bellatrix’s cruel reputation, her proclivity for burning anything that displeases her. Were she not Bellatrix’s protected younger sister, she would no doubt be on the receiving end of her searing wand or cutting tongue, until she is immobilized by bone-crushing pain.

She takes another stabilizing sip of water and frames her expression into repentant indignation. “I would never question the Dark Lord’s decision or defy one of his orders. You need not worry about my commitment.”

“Good,” says Bellatrix, momentarily placated. “We will begin then. Close your eyes and clear your mind. Empty it of all thoughts and emotions, as you did before.”

Narcissa blinks her eyes closed and stares into the dark abyss awaiting her. She sees nothing; she thinks nothing; she feels nothing.

“Now,” her sister says in a low voice, “think about *her*. Remember your last memory of her before she betrayed us, what you saw, what you did. Try to recall even the most insignificant details: the exact shade of your dress or the tone of her voice. The more detailed the memory, the easier it will be to transform and store it.”

Bellatrix’s measured voice ebbs and flows, its gentle cadence swirling through Narcissa’s mind and prickling in her ears as she struggles to bring the raw memory into focus.

“Once you have the memory thoroughly visualized, conjure up any feelings associated with the moment. With suppressed memories, emotional ties may become unbearably strong when you finally pay attention to them. That is fine. We need those overwhelming emotions to properly sequester the memory in a letter.”

Narcissa visualizes in painstaking detail an empty classroom. The moonlight illuminates the room in a ghostly glow. Andromeda stands before her, shoulders hunched forward protectively, face hidden in her hands as she desperately pleads with her younger sister. Narcissa is drowning in disappointment and resignation. She gasps for air as she fights against the suffocating weight of suppressed emotions.

“Next, I want you to imagine a piece of blank stationary. Hold the paper in your mind as you recall every specific detail about the memory. Take all those overwhelming emotions and channel them towards the empty paper. ”

She pictures plain white parchment with a hint of rose perfume wafting from it. It rests heavily in her mind, the thick paper floating from corner to corner. She pours all of her heady emotions and detailed images onto the rough parchment. Narcissa watches the parchment steadily fill with looping black writing, lines and lines and lines of writing, *her* handwriting.

Not wanting to continue staring at the elegant curling script, she makes a sharp crease in the letter. She makes another crease, folding it neatly into thirds. She places the letter in a plain white envelope and labels the front with a single “A” before tossing it randomly into the empty blackness of her cleared mind.

“Open your eyes. How do you feel?”

Narcissa blinks her eyes open. Bellatrix remains lounging on the sofa beside her in the sitting room, her fingers tapping impatiently as she scrupulously studies her younger sister.

“Lighter, like the memory is still there, but the emotional weight of it has lifted somehow.”

“That’s progress,” says Bellatrix. “You might have missed some parts when you were storing the memory in the letter, so you’re still feeling lingering emotion. You can go back later to either add more to the letter or create a new one. With time and practice, you will no longer feel specific memories unless you purposely recall them again.”

Lies. Narcissa already knows she has poured every ounce of disappointment and anger into her letter. If she can still feel lingering emotions after all that, there is no way they will ever go away. She needs to determine a better way to mask them.

“What about current emotions or thoughts? How do you hide those from a Legilimens?”

“It is possible for a highly skilled Occlumens to exclude specific thoughts from occupying the forefront of their mind. If you sequester unwanted thoughts away but continue to allow others to float to the surface, you can give the impression that your mind is transparent and the truth easily discernible.” Bellatrix narrows her eyes suspiciously, trying to parse out what exactly her younger sister plans on hiding from her.

Backtracking immediately, Narcissa tries to distract her older sister's observant gaze. “I’m sure you already have that mastered. I doubt I will ever be skilled enough to do that.”

“Possibly, when you become more adept at controlling your own mind,” responds Bellatrix, slightly mollified by the compliment. She gives Narcissa a sharp look before adding, “But you’ll never be good enough to fool the Dark Lord so don’t bother trying.”

Narcissa quickly ducks her head in chastised agreement.

“Let us continue organizing your memories. I will help guide you through a few more, then I will attempt to search your mind again.”

As they work throughout the day, the pounding in Narcissa’s head steadily grows until she can barely open her eyes against the excruciating pain. But she dares not mention this to her older sister, who would only take illness as a sign of weakness and lack of commitment.

Bellatrix finally pauses in her instruction and allows Narcissa to take a well-needed replenishing drink. Narcissa has long abandoned her glass of water and now gulps down a Pepper Up Potion like a dehydrated woman in a desert. Hot steam irritates her ears and causes her straight blonde hair to frizz at the edges, but at least her throbbing migraine has subsided, minimally.

“Shall we go once more?” her sister asks, sipping unconcernedly from her second glass of wine. “I don’t have much time before I need to leave for the mission this evening. Soon you’ll be joining us, and you can see for yourself how satisfying it is to show pretentious Muggles their rightful place, especially the ones living in those irritatingly posh neighbourhoods.”

“Okay, once more.” Narcissa readies herself on the lumpy sofa, her pale hands clutched tightly in her lap. She tries not to wince at the oncoming burn of the intrusion into her thoughts as Bellatrix raises her wand and recites the spell.

“Legilimens.”

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Malfoy Manor is cold and quiet.

Under a heavy Disillusionment Charm, Narcissa softly pads invisible down the winding staircase and climbs onto the landing by the window. Covered by a thick curtain and secluded in a lonely corner, she watches the comings and goings from her high perch.

No one knows about her ledge by the window, not even the Dark Lord himself. She often secludes herself by the window during his private meetings; everyone always puts silencing spells on the doors but no one bothers with the windows.

After one such meeting, she was worried that he had noticed her when he had thrown a glance towards the window while walking down the stairs. She had hurriedly ducked her
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head to avoid his unnerving red eyes and in the next moment, he was sweeping out the door leaving Narcissa to believe she had imagined his piercing gaze.

Not even her husband has discovered her hiding place, even with his constant watchful eye on her. Him worrying incessantly about her safety with multiple Death Eaters traipsing in and out of their house.

Except, Lucius is not here to protect her now. After the fiasco at the Department of Ministries and his subsequent imprisonment, she alone remained to watch over their son.

Their son. Their heir. Her boy, barely sixteen with the heavy responsibility of his family on his fragile shoulders already. With Lucius falling out of favour, the Dark Lord has been relentless in recruiting the last of the Malfoys, assigning him an impossible task that she knows will only lead to failure.

She would do anything for Draco, has done anything for Draco. She would sacrifice and kill, turn to the enemy for help.

Anything for Draco.

Sitting by the gaping window and hidden by lengthening shadows, she watches and she waits for a letter that may never come.

When she wrote to *her* for the first time in twenty years, she hardly expected a prompt response, if any response at all. Narcissa can only hope that after all this time, she is still a Black and a Slytherin at heart.

A faint tap made by a small beak draws her attention to the lowest grimiest section of the window. She opens the window to allow the small brown owl to flutter inside and rest on her lap. Tied to its skinny leg is a plain white envelope, curiously blank except for a sole nondescript “C” inked onto the front.

Cautiously opening the envelope she takes out the parchment and is bombarded by elegant looping script. Narcissa nearly rips the letter into shreds right then, staring at the beautiful slanting cursive, but restrains herself at the last second.

Anxiously skimming through the first few lines, she immediately notes the absence of any names mentioned in the letter.

Narcissa is glad.

She doesn’t want to think about her long discarded nickname written in painfully familiar handwriting. And, in the unlikely chance that someone managed to intercept the letter and read its contents, the letter is vague enough to be impossible to link back to a Death Eater’s wife or a blood-traitor deserter.

She breathlessly scans through the mind-numbingly chatty paragraphs about “I hope you and your family are doing well” and “I’ve missed hearing from you.” It’s not until she comes to the very last paragraph that a sentence catches her interest.

“Remember when we used to play hide and seek and you would win every time?”

Of course she remembers. Though she’s hidden the memory away in her mind, she still remembers.

“You are always welcome to come by, so we can try again. Next time, bring your young one too. I’m anxious to meet him.”

Narcissa exhales in blessed relief, recognizing the message for what it is. If all else fails, her son will have a safe place to go. It may not be her first or even her fifth choice, but should her son be left on his own and found at the unwitting end of the Dark Lord’s wrathful wand, he will have somewhere to escape.

Draco will survive. No matter what, Draco will live.

She reaches the last line of the letter and halts her frantic reading to frown in confusion. The letter ends with a short farewell note and a caring sign-off, but nothing else.

Is that it? No signature, no instructions, no additional information.

“From your family, always,” it says, a touching sentiment if only Narcissa believed it to be true.

“Ψhank you,” it finishes.

She squints down at the parchment, willing her blurry eyes not to be deceiving her. Hunching over the paper in her lap, she brings the inked writing closer to her face, her long straight hair cascading around her and shielding the letter in a blonde dome of secrets and hidden messages.

Yes, she did see that correctly. The “T” in the last line of text has been sneakily replaced by an ancient rune.

Narcissa always did have a special preference for the runespoor rune, a drawing of a magical three headed snake representing the number three. She remembers doodling it obsessively into her notes for Ancient Runes, her favorite class by far. Her sister had jokingly said they should try to find a runespoor to adopt since Narcissa loved them so much.

Oh, she’s clever. There must be something else hidden within the letter, something to be revealed.

She touches her wand to the edge of the letter, casting a wordless *revelio* through the parchment.

No change. The spell must be something more specific than that.

A letter shudders in the depths of her mind, pleading for her attention. She coaxes it to the surface and opens the carefully sealed memory.

Lightning flashes outside the window to her childhood bedroom. The Black family mansion holds its breath as it waits for the impending crack of approaching thunder. Narcissa huddles under her blankets further. She is a big girl; she will not be scared.

BOOM. CRACK. BOOM.

Throwing off the blanket, Narcissa sprints to her sister's closed door and knocks a distinct rhythm before pushing it open and entering the room.

"Are you scared?" her sister asks, scooting to one side of her massive bed.

"No, of course not," Narcissa replies. The edges of the memory start to shift and blur. The center pulses and swirls before fading back into the corners of her mind.

She touches her wand to the inked rune of three and taps a distinct rhythm—2 quick taps, a precise 3 second pause, then 2 more taps. The ruin glows a sinister red before fading to a calloused black.

At the bottom of the parchment, curly writing slowly emerges. She breathlessly watches black ink bleed across the empty space as a written location is revealed. She immediately scrunches her eyes closed. She may be an adequate Occlumens, but the less information she has to hide from the Dark Lord, the safer Draco will be.

Squinting through half-shut eyes, she disappears the address with a few taps of her wand then rips the bottom section of the letter cleanly off. She casts a wordless *incendio* on the remaining larger portion, opens the window wider, and watches as the ashes fall to the ground outside below.

Later, she will give the invisible address to Draco with special instructions on how to reveal it and when to use it.

But first, she plans her visit to a certain man with greasy black hair and a long hooked nose. She readies her pleading tears and hunched shaking shoulders.

Why accept the worst possible outcome if she can find a way, or person, to prevent it? Why?

She hopes, should she and her family survive this dreadful year unscathed, that by next year the Dark Lord and his reign of heavy oppression will have moved on from Malfoy Manor.

One year later, Charity Burbage lies on her back suspended by invisible strings above the Malfoys' absurdly long dinner table. Her head hangs precariously as she gasps for breath, leaving her neck exposed to the chilly air. Her back bows with the unsupported weight of her fatigued body.

With a flick of his thin wand the Dark Lord summons her closer. Her body floats toward the head of the table where a skeletal man with red gleaming eyes looks on with satisfaction.

To his left sits a woman with riotous black curls, ivory skin, and eyes so black they shimmer in their sunken sockets. The woman stares hungrily at the barely conscious Muggle studies professor; her wand twitches at her side in anticipation. To his right sits a man with greasy

black hair, sallow skin, and a long hooked nose. The man glances disinteredly at the approaching body, face void of remorse for his colleague hanging above him.

Further down the table sits a pale woman with long blonde hair so straight it could cut her severe cheekbones. She sits silently beside a man with white-blonde hair almost as straight as hers if not for his dishevelled appearance. As the heaving body drifts past her, she stiffens in her seat, unnoticeable to anyone but her husband beside her who cautiously rests a white trembling hand on her stockinged knee under the table.

“Avada Kedavra,” the Dark Lord says in his hushed whispery voice. The lifeless body falls to the table with a dull thud. He scans the table of his devoted followers for their reaction.

Narcissa keeps her head down and does not meet his unsettling red eyes.

When she finally looks up from Lucius’s hand on her knee, she stares directly into the smug face of Alecto Carrow across from her. It’s a face that says “I knew you couldn’t handle it” and “You can’t cower behind a pretty face forever.” Narcissa lifts her chin determinedly and glares across the table with icy blue eyes, to which Alecto responds by raising the side of her mouth into a mocking sneer.

As soon as the meeting is dismissed, Alecto looks away pretending their silent conversation never happened; Narcissa is only too relieved. She gives her terrified son’s arm a brief reassuring squeeze before allowing him to be escorted into the study by her husband and a gaggle of other high ranking Death Eaters.

Narcissa retreats to the edge of the garden, where she kneels next to a patch of white roses hidden in the shadow of the encroaching trees.

Here, and only here, she allows her to feel and think, but she does not cry. She tucks away the horrible memory of the Muggle-loving woman now being devoured by the Dark Lord’s snake, and she seals away her agonizing worry for her son’s loss of innocence upon witnessing yet another death.

Why is all this pain, all this death necessary? Why?

By the time she has concealed the last of her emotions, the sun has set and the moon has risen. With a grim face and empty mind, she returns to the crowded manor packed with uninvited guests. Alecto smirks but does not draw attention to Narcissa’s late reappearance.

Narcissa hides in her room, waiting for the house to fall silent and the restless night to overtake it.

One year later, Narcissa waits in the restless night in a hushed clearing in the depths of the Forbidden Forest. The prone bodies of the Dark Lord and Harry Potter lay on the ground amidst a circle of battle frenzied Death Eaters.

The Dark Lord stirs and Bellatrix hurriedly rushes towards him. Narcissa calculates her chances of escaping and the probability of him noticing her absence while he regains consciousness.

As he stumbles to his feet, Bellatrix hovering fretfully below him, he turns his sharp gaze to the black-haired boy still laying unmoving in the cold grass.

"You," he says, jabbing his wand at her. Narcissa shrieks as an aggressive explosion knocks into her and forces her to lurch forward. “Examine him. Tell me whether he is dead."

She slowly approaches the boy, and leans over his steadily breathing body.

"Is Draco alive? Is he in the castle?" she whispers, bare audible. Her lips are an inch from his ear, her head bent so low that her long straight hair shields his face from the onlookers.

"Yes," he breathes back.

She contracts her hand on his chest, her nails piercing him, then withdraws.

She sits up.

When the Dark Lord’s scarlet eyes meet her blue ones, she does not flinch; she does not look away. She stares impassively back, mind blank, a single thought floating on its clear surface as he impatiently probes into her mind searching for her answer.

Why keep fighting? Why?

"He is dead!" she calls to the watchers.

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“Potter.”

“Malfoy.”

“To what do I owe the pleasure? The Saviour of the Wizarding World on my doorstep.” Twenty years since their school days together and the arrogant drawl to Draco’s voice can still get Harry’s blood boiling within seconds.

“Truly lovely to see you again, Malfoy,” he says, scooting into the manor and brushing rudely past the taller man standing in the doorway.

“Spectacular,” Draco says, an annoyed sneer on his thin pale face.

“I’m here to see your mother.”

Draco gives him a cold lengthy stare with sharp grey eyes before replying, “She’s in the sitting room. Go to the West Wing —if you can figure out which direction that is with your tiny Gryffindor brain—and take the first set of stairs up to the third floor . It will be the door after the seventh portrait on the right.”

“Thanks,” Harry says through gritted teeth, but Draco is already turning away and sweeping down the long hallway in his tailored robes. His silver-blonde hair that is slicked back into a precisely placed ponytail swings behind him.
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Many winding turns, flights of stairs, and asking for help from the house elf later, Harry peeks his head into the open door of the sitting room to find Narcissa inside.

“You’re a difficult person to get in contact with,” he says by way of greeting, stepping into the warm room.

“I did not wish to be found,” she responds, looking over at him from her perch in a comfy armchair in front of a roaring fire. Her long blonde hair falls casually past her shoulders and almost to her waist.

She gestures towards the empty seat beside her. There’s a table set with tea nestled between the two chairs, as if she had been expecting him. She pours him a cup, and they sit amicably sipping tea as they stare into the glowing fireplace.

“So Mr. Potter, what is the reason for your untimely visit?” Narcissa says after a long while of watching the lively dancing flames.

Harry clears his throat and noisily sets down his teacup.

“Andy entrusted her will to me before she died,” he tells her, taking out an innocuous-looking envelope from his Auror grade travel bag. “I’ve brought it with me if you would like to read it… and I’ve also brought the items she requested be passed along to you.”

Narcissa extends her manicured hand for the plain large envelope clutched in Harry’s tight grip. Wordlessly, he hands over the well-worn papers, wrinkled from repeated readings, despairing tears, and frustrated hands.

She plucks the document from its casing and quickly scans over its contents.

She remembers watching Andromeda waste away. She tried visiting once after the battle, but left after fruitlessly attempting to move her sister away from the empty fireplace. She then sent her sister a Mind Healer in the hopes that if Andromeda didn’t want to talk to her, she would at least talk to a professional. The first Healer lasted two weeks; the second lasted two days. After the fifth one in just as many weeks refused to return after getting banished from the cottage with a wandless *scourgify* to the mouth, she didn’t bother sending another.

After Teddy moved back in, Harry wrote and reported a vast improvement in her sister’s demeanor, but Narcissa continued to worry from afar. In the passing years, she visited Andromeda’s tiny cottage only once per year, to punctually deliver a ridiculously expensive — and highly underappreciated — present for Teddy’s birthday.

During her limited visits she saw her sister’s happy facade, the jokes and the smiles. But she also saw the lingering pain underneath: the way her smile would fall abruptly as soon as Teddy looked away, the protective hunch of her shoulders while standing in the garden, her vacant stare while looking into the fireplace. She was not surprised to hear that Andromeda had fallen severely ill not long after Teddy had moved out.

She wonders what she would have done if Draco had not made it through the war, if she had made a mistake and let her secrets slip, if she was that little bit worse at hiding in the

shadows. She had multiple contingency plans, naturally, for if both Lucius and her were improbably killed, but it is unfathomable to imagine her little boy gone before her. She shudders painfully at the thought. *Would she have faded away like Andromeda, or not even bothered?*

Best not to dwell on what could have happened in the long ago past.

She places the document back in the envelope and returns it to Harry, who immediately stores it again in his bag.

“Well Mr. Potter shall we get on with it then?”

“Mrs. Malfoy, please, after everything that’s happened, call me Harry.”

She stares at him appraisingly. He is no longer the war-ravaged boy in the woods, laying unmoving but breathing steadily in the cold grass. He is now a man with his own family and his own feelings of grief over her sister.

She gives a brief nod in agreement.

“Shall I start then?”

“Yes, Harry,” she says, “I’m ready.”

Chapter End Notes

I do wonder what would have happened if they had played Uno instead of hide and seek.

Narcissa & Lucius

Chapter Summary

5 times Lucius was a terrible husband and 1 time he wasn't.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Lucius, darling, how kind of you to join me on our 2nd date."

"My apologies for the delay. I was held back at the manor by an unexpected emergency."

"What emergency?"

"Um…"

"Did it have something to do with your wardrobe?"

"Well yes, actually. How did you know?"

"Your mother sent the house elf to notify me. Said something about how you wanted to impress me and couldn't decide which robes to wear."

"She did what!?"

"You need not worry about impressing me. We're already betrothed. These dinners are more for appearances than traditional courting."

"That's true, I suppose."

"But do be on time for our wedding, will you?"

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"Lucius, darling, come back to bed. We're not finished yet."

"What do you mean? I need at least a few minutes to rest before we can go again."

"What I mean is 'I' haven't finished yet. I don't expect to be left unsatisfied on my wedding night."

"Oh."
~~~

“From the stories the Zabini girl used to tell in the common room, you always end before your partner is satisfied.”

“That is entirely untrue! She enjoyed herself every time. I saw her; I was there.”

“Maybe she exaggerated her enjoyment in front of you.”

"Hmm… I never considered that."

"Indeed."

“You would tell me if you weren’t enjoying it, yes?”

“I’m telling you now.”

“Right. Okay. Good."

"..."

"I’ll just get back in bed then.”

“Splendid. Make sure to put your hand right here…”

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“Lucius, darling, why does the West Wing feel more melancholy than usual this past week?"

"Ah, that would be the Cape of Infinite Sorrow that I acquired from Mister Parkinson a few days ago. Normally, it causes only those surrounding the wearer to be immobilized by tears, but it’s become somewhat temperamental after being moved.”

"And why would he give you that?"

"His wife is purging their place of Dark artefacts in the event the ministry authorizes a search. He didn't want to discard it, so he gifted it to me. I stored it under the sitting room with the rest of our collection."

"I see."

"But don't worry. The effects will wear off within the month and you won't notice it anymore."

"I refuse to avoid a whole wing of the manor for an entire month."

"Well, it won't be the *entire* month, possibly 3 weeks at most."

"So you say."

"Fine, fine. I'll look into moving it elsewhere."
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"Good. Why don't you also look into strengthening the concealment wards in the sitting room while you're doing that?"

~~~

"Lucius, darling, stop kicking the house elf. The screams are giving me a headache."

"If he would only do his fucking job then I wouldn't need to punish him."

"Let me handle his punishment, won't you? Maybe something with a little less screaming."

"Alright, if you insist."

"Dobby, go change out of those bloody rags and ice your ribs. Your new punishment is to lay down for the rest of the day."

"What!? But resting isn't a punishment."

"I know."

"Oh... yes, alright. You're right. I may have been a bit harsh on him."

"I know."

~~~

"Lucius, darling, please calm down so we can talk about this rationally."

"No, I will not calm down. I forbid you from taking the Dark Mark!"

"We are both loyal to the Dark Lord. To show our loyalty we should both be marked."

"No, it's too dangerous. Taking the mark will mean the Dark Lord can call on you for a mission at any time. I won't risk your safety like that."

"What do you propose we do then?"

"I will take the mark. And you will not. We can claim I don't want to mar your beautiful skin."

"Alright, if you insist."

"I insist."

"I do so love my beautiful skin."

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"Narcissa, love, are you sure about this?"

"Yes, I've already decided."
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“There is volatile unknown magic involved. I don’t want you to get hurt because of this.”

“Yes, I’m aware. But I’ve already made my decision.”

“We can keep trying for a while longer. We don’t have to resort to this quite yet.”

“We both know continuing as we are won’t change anything.”

“But maybe if we went to see a different Healer… there are 2 in Germany that specialize in __”

“No.”

“Okay. You know I support your decision.”

“Yes, I know.”

“I can’t wait to have a child together.”

“Me too, darling,” she says, “I’m ready.”

Bonus scene:

“Lucius, darling, you can’t spend 5,000 galleons on bribing the new committee member. Don’t tell me you forgot. We already set aside that amount to redo your study on the fourth floor next month.”

“But he’s the only one left who's blocking the hippogriff case.”

“...”

“...”

“500 galleons should be sufficient. Send a letter to Draco when the verdict passes.”

Chapter End Notes

Aka Lucius is a hot mess and Narcissa is a boss.

Narcissa & Draco

Chapter Summary

She would sacrifice and kill, turn to the enemy for help, trust Severus Snape.

Anything for Draco.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Narcissa noiselessly stirs her cup, and takes a dainty sip of tea in the stilted silence. She is a master of fake pleasantries and false sympathy, no matter the time or how insipid the conversation.

She smiles serenely at today's guest.

"Mrs. Nott," she says sweetly, "You've been practically glowing recently. Do tell, how do you maintain such a youthful appearance with your approaching age?"

"Oh, I'm so glad you noticed," Mrs. Nott says, her round face lifting into a smug smirk. As if she could not notice, with Mrs. Nott prancing about during the latest dinner party and boasting loudly about her "renewed vitality." She had practically invited herself to tea at Malfoy Manor to brag about her sudden reinvigoration.

"I must say, it was such a surprise," she continues, lifting a teacup in her swollen hands. "Theo and I have been trying for years with no success, decades even. We were ever so pleased when it happened."

"When what happened, exactly?" Narcissa says, placing her teacup gently on the intricately painted saucer to avoid seeing her guest's self-satisfied grin.

"But didn't you know?" replies Mrs. Nott, obviously pleased by the Malfoys' lack of knowing. "I'm expecting, of course."

She barely manages to keep the envious strain out of her voice at this shocking revelation.

"Congratulations, you must be very happy."

"Oh, we are indeed… but it took a lot of hard work, you know," her irritating guest titters, winking lavisciously at her.

"I'm sure it did," she replies dispassionately.

She seriously considers cutting this vexing tea short and sending Mrs. Nott and her embryonic heir on her merry way so that she can cry angry bitter tears in her bedroom alone. But that is just not done, not in the exclusive circles of upper class pureblood wives.

With a deep calming breath, she is the distinguished Mrs. Malfoy once more, the doting wife to Lucius Malfoy, a powerful figurehead in the British wizarding community and rising officer among the Death Eater ranks.

“Do you know the date yet?” she asks pleasantly, delicately dabbing the corner of her pursed red lips with a napkin.

“Near the end of August,” Mrs. Nott says, oblivious to the jealous rage simmering in her host’s unblinking blue eyes.

“How lovely for you.” A covetous possessiveness seeps into her tone unbidden.

“Although—” Mrs. Nott regards Narcissa pityingly, apparently not as oblivious as she seems. “Little Theo would not have been possible without a bit of extra help.”

“Those fertility potions are useless.” She quickly dismisses any attempts by Mrs. Nott of forcing any on her. She would know how useless they are; she’s already tried them all.

“I don’t mean those pointless things, *Narcissssssa* darling.”

She utterly despises the way Mrs. Nott calls her by name, dragging the “s” out into a slimy slytherin’ sound, as if she were a small child who needs placating to avoid throwing a massive tantrum.

Her loathsome guest continues, “I mean”—she glances about the sitting room surreptitiously, as if expecting to find eavesdroppers lurking in the corners—“a simple extra spell, a harmless extra potion from an old forgotten ritual, just to help things along.”

Narcissa freezes, intrigued. Her right index finger twitches subtly around the fragile teacup, the only movement in her rigid demeanor.

She considers her options. It’s risky showing the depth of her interest too soon; it would not do for Mrs. Nott to dangle her interest above her, taunting her for amusement. She would kill before she let such humiliation occur.

Alternatively, Mrs. Nott may also be bluffing about the existence of such a spell or potion. Her and Lucius had scoured every text in the expansive library at Malfoy Manor, and found no such ritual, or at least not a viable one. It is unlikely that the Notts would have additional resources available to them, ones Narcissa has not already considered and discarded.

However, there is always a possibility, no matter how unlikely.

The best option would be to ever so gradually coax it out of Mrs. Nott, perhaps over a bottle of nicely aged Portuegese Port wine, but she can’t stand the woman in all her toddling glory, and besides, now wine is unusable. She decides on a more direct but no less effective approach; Salazar Slytherin shivers in his grave.

She looks over at her guest with her signature doe-eyed gaze, her voice trembling with just enough breathlessness.

“I did not know such a spell existed. I had almost given up after nearly five years of no success, and with my sister also struggling as well, but you have given me hope again… Truly, you are an inspiration,” she says, using her napkin to wipe fake tears from her eyes.

“You must have been so brave to use an ancient spell like that. Tell me, was it painful?” She furrows her brow in convincing concern, watery blue eyes gazing at her guest in pleading desperation.

“No no, not at all,” Mrs. Nott replies, convinced. She reaches across the table and consolingly pats the back of her blonde-haired friend’s stiff hand. “Do not lose hope, child. Your time will come soon, maybe sooner if you use the same ritual that Theo and I did.”

“Oh, that would be positively wonderful,” she gracefully swoons. “Lucius and I would be so grateful to you both.”

A calculated risk, mentioning her husband by name. But if the Notts are as power-hungry as Lucius has led her to believe, having the esteemed Malfoys in their debt would undoubtedly be a boon to their reputation.

A calculated risk with immediate payout.

“My dear Narcissssa, anything for a friend.”

Mrs. Nott reaches for a nearby quill and piece of spare parchment and writes something swiftly on the back of it. She places the paper on the table near Narcissa’s empty cup of tea.

“I’ll send you the book where the ritual is mentioned… Although I should warn you, you may find it distasteful,” she says, gently squeezing her young friend’s unmoving hand.

“It won’t be an issue,” replies Narcissa absently, her attention focused on the cramped writing on the spare bit of parchment.

“Infans prodidit,” it says in Latin. *Infant they bore* .

She wonders if Mrs. Nott has solved the answer to her enveloping problem with one sweep of a quill or if Mrs. Nott is simply an idiot.

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"The Notts are idiots, stupendous self-indulgent idiots."

Severus Snape snarls at the thick tomb in his hand, the one delivered by owl not a fortnight after Mrs. Nott's eye-opening tea.

"But is it feasible? Can you do it?" Narcissa scrutinizes their most trusted friend, sitting before her in the manor library on a dreary spring evening.
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"Obviously," replies Severus, his sallow face settling into a displeased scowl.

"It's not a matter of if I *could.* The potion, though wickedly difficult and extremely time-consuming, is undoubtedly within my range of expertise. It's a matter of whether I *should*... you are aware of the ingredients, yes? Some of them are so rare, each ounce will cost thousands of galleons; most of them are illegal. Not to mention the possible detriment to your health."

"Money is not an issue. I will handle it," her husband assures their dark-haired friend. "As for our health, we'll have access to the best Healers at St. Mungo's, if necessary. And with a few extra galleons, discreetly."

Severus, if possible, scowls even further, unconvinced.

At Hogwarts Lucius had eagerly taken the talented half-blood under his wing, teaching him to hide his shameful Muggle parentage and fit into the competitive Slytherin hierarchy. After finishing school the year prior, the young potions prodigy had declined multiple prestigious internships and followed his revered white-haired friend into the Death Eater ranks where he quickly caught the attention of the Dark Lord. Her husband had been ecstatic that his recruit had been recognized for his talents and steadily promoted.

"And the 'distasteful' item?" Severus inquires. Him and Lucius both glance at Narcissa in question.

"If it must be done, then it shall be done. I will handle it."

Her slick-haired friend nods, a slightly disturbed expression on his pale face. Her husband surveys her worriedly.

Severus returns his attention to the table scattered with a plethora of ritual-based texts.

"There is no plausible way the Notts could have successfully used this ritual. I cross-referenced it with a few books in the Restricted Section—yes, Dumbledore, the old fool, granted me permission to visit the school when I mentioned I was considering a potions apprenticeship in Wales and needed to research a rare potion—and their book omits most of the necessary steps or ingredients. I doubt they bothered or even knew the extent of all of it."

He stands heatedly from his chair, unbuttoning his cuffs and rolling them up, exposing the gleaming black of the Dark Mark on a slim forearm underneath.

"They most likely completely misinterpreted a complex ritual and still ended up bearing a child. Morgana herself must have helped them conceive. This is honestly an affront to ritualistic practice and the art of potion making!"

He continues on his frustrated rant, pacing the floor of the library. She exchanges a look with her husband, standing across the way by the bookshelf on Charmed Amulets and Cursed Jewelry, who shrugs a single shoulder in return. The only other time they've seen their friend as worked up like this was after the nameless Mudblood had cast him off and Lucius had broken out the top tier brandy.

"What probably happened was those sadistic bastards thought they successfully completed the ritual and celebrated with more… you know, *that,* "—he flaps his arm in a dismissive gesture—"in effect, conception was a side effect and not the result of the actual ritual." He finishes his rant with a dramatic flop back into his chair. He glares at the thick tomb still open on the table, like it had personally insulted all potion masters everywhere.

Lucius comes to sit across from his grumbling friend, crossing his legs elegantly and tapping his long black cane with a silver snake head on the edge of the table.

"You know you can say the word," he says, his grey eyes twinkling with mirth. "My wife isn't an innocent flower."

Severus's pallid cheeks flush the lightest pink, but his eyes remain unwaveringly apathetic. "I wouldn't presume to be rude by saying such vulgar language in your own house."

"Fucking,"—Severus inhales a shocked gasp—"you meant to say they celebrated with more fucking. Just because you aren't interested in participating, doesn't mean everyone else is as naive as you," Narcissa says, raising one artful eyebrow.

Her husband releases an amused chuckle beside her.

"Love, I was going to say shagging, but that is also an appropriate term, yes." He sends her a furtive wink and slips a hand under the table to caress her stockinged knee before addressing his astonished friend.

"And Severus we've known each other for years now. My family is your family. There is no need to feel uncomfortable in the manor, ever."

"Right. I will keep that in mind," Severus replies, looking dazedly between the two of them before glancing away with a small shudder.

"Right," he says again. "I will work on preparing everything for the potion. Lucius, remember to notify me when you've located the more costly items. Narcissa—" He pauses and considers her from across the table. "If you need any assistance with your item, don't hesitate to contact me."

He bids goodbye and hastens away, his bat-like cloak billowing behind him.

Nearly half a year later finds the Malfoys hovering on a deserted corner in a shabby area of Muggle London. Narcissa knocks determinedly on the faded wooden door; a moment later the door cracks open and a groggy Severus is seen peering out at them.

"What?" he demands of the listless night.

"Severus, I need your assistance," says Narcissa, her voice nervous yet commanding.

"One minute, please," he replies, closing the door again and reappearing a minute later fully dressed in his typical black.

They materialize in a puff of shifting mist in front of a dreary grey building. Lucius stalks ahead, wand out, ensuring the area is secured from any hidden threats.

Narcissa turns to Severus walking up the craggly sidewalk beside her. “Infans prodidit, the name of the ritual,” she begins. “Primary meaning is ‘infant they bore.’ However, there is a secondary lesser-known meaning to the phrase.”

Severus looks at her questioningly.

“It means ‘infant they abandoned.'" She stares unseeingly at the tall decrepit building merging into view ahead of them. A large “W” greets them above the front door, barely visible on the washed out stone.

“I see,” says Severus stone-faced, but a muscle in his cheek twitches.

“I need your assistance in choosing a suitable item. I am unsure which specifications would be the most beneficial for the spell.”

“The only requirements are alive and young, preferably less than one year.”

“Then, let’s hope we’ll find an item that meets those requirements tonight.”

“One can only hope,” replies Severus flatly as they finally reach the large double doors.

Lucius approaches them from the side of the building, announcing the premises “all clear, unsurprisingly. This place feels so ominous, anyone who voluntarily comes here at night must be either verifiably insane or scarily desperate.”

With a whispered *alohomora,* the three silently enter the sleeping Muggle orphanage, searching for an item both young and alive.

An hour later, they exit the sleeping Muggle orphanage. In Narcissa’s arms, she cradles a bundle of warm blankets, breathing steadily under the invisible blinking stars.

At the end of the jagged sidewalk Severus faces the Malfoys’ before Disapparating away. “You will most definitely be imprisoned, both of you, if this gets out,” he says, his voice low in warning.

Narcissa turns her steely blue eyes on their closest friend and replies, “Then it won’t get out.”

From across the street, shrouded in cool swirling mist, Alice Longbottom watches.

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The Ritual

Taking tea on the third floor balcony—a drop of milk, one tiny scoop of sugar—Narcissa casts a *tempus* and checks the time. Less than twelve hours left until the start of the ritual that will either add new life to their limited existence or pointlessly take one away.
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Lucius shuffles in wearing fuzzy slippers and a thin grey dressing gown, his long white hair tangled and messy, his pale face bleary from sleep.

“Should we have waited until the Nott child is born?” she greets her waking husband. “He’s due any day now. Wouldn’t it be more auspicious to wait until after his birth?”

“Gnng,” is her husband’s eloquent response. He takes a sip of tea—three liberal spoons of sugars, no milk—and sighs, looking out onto their expansive grounds.

The stars flicker out as the rising sun bathes the lawn in comforting golden beams, but Lucius is not fooled. He knows what devilry lurks in the tall grass, namely the vicious albino peacocks that have been on the manor for generations. Any venture to remove them at this point would be considered blasphemy by every Malfoy ancestor before him. He sighs again into his teacup, imagining peacock-free gardens and heirs running wild.

Two full cups of tea later, he finally responds to his wife’s questioning.

“Severus said this opportunity will not come again until February with the next solar eclipse. Something about how with the moon pausing between the sun and the earth, we can ‘bask in the raw power of the new moon’ while also ‘channeling the subdued energy of the covered sun.’ I’m not too certain; I stopped listening after approximately two minutes—you know how he gets when he’s lecturing. But… ”

He shifts in his seat and turns to look at his wife, her long blond hair shining in the morning light. “I do know that if we postpone the ritual, we will have to reacquire the ingredients again. Most of them will be unusable within a month or two.”

“Hmm,” she says and takes a sip of tea. “Then let’s best hope that the Nott boy is born within the next week. It would be such a tragedy if Mrs. Nott held on until September and our children were in the same year at school.”

“A true tragedy, indeed,” he says, his lips quirking in the ghost of a smile.

A piercing wail breaks the peaceful morning solitude.

“Are they always this noisy?” Lucius asks, nibbling on a scone. Narcissa gives her husband a disbelieving stare and replies, “Yes, they’re always like that. Usually even more so; this one’s been mostly quiet because of its illness.”

“That’s truly unfortunate. I haven’t had a full night’s sleep for the whole past week.”

She minutely shakes her head in exasperation at her obtuse husband.

“I’ll leave some books for you on childhood development on the nightstand,” she says, standing from her chair and smoothing down her silk nightgown. “In the meantime why don’t you see if you can stop the crying? It will be good practice. And I need to start on the runic circles for the ritual.”

She kisses her husband on the cheek and breezes from the balcony, leaving him muttering about “Why can’t the house elves do it?” and “stupid ley lines” behind her.

Hour 0: The Mother

“It’s nearly time,” Severus informs them in the sweltering evening air. “We will have exactly six minutes and three seconds to perform the first step of the ritual. Is everything prepared?”

The three of them, plus a warm bundle of blankets, are poised in the center of a maze-like drawing, intricate overlapping lines meticulously burned into the ground by Narcissa earlier that day. They weave and wander, creating a complex flower of ruins and symbols.

“Yes, everything is prepared,” she answers him. Her husband, gingerly holding the sleeping bundle of blankets beside her, nods in agreement.

“Then Narcissa, if you will… ” He motions to the solid gold cauldron simmering with a dull purple liquid behind him. She slowly walks toward it, rolling her sleeve up above an unmarked forearm and pulling a small silver knife from the seam of her dress.

Severus checks the time again. The sky rapidly darkens and the silhouette of the moon becomes visible over the backdrop of a burning sun, circling it in a dark orange glow.

“Now,” he says.

Narcissa drags the knife across the palm of her hand, opening a deep bleeding gash. She hears her husband moan a worried complaint behind her, but she ignores him. She lets the drops of blood fall into the roiling cauldron as she speaks.

“Under the darkness of the moon, a mother becomes a protector… With the blood of pain and longing, a new life forms.”

The liquid writhes and pulses, changing into a deep bronze orange, mirroring the halo around the black moon in the darkened sky.

As soon as she steps away, Severus is there frantically adding chopped ingredients and small vials of vile-smelling liquids. Exactly six minutes and three seconds later, he covers the cauldron and wipes his sweaty brow in relief.

“Well, that’s it,” he says. “For now at least… we have to continue stirring it every hour—2 counter-clockwise, 3 clockwise, then 2 counter-clockwise stirs again—until the next step in seven hours. Until then, we wait.”

Lucius rushes over to heal Narcissa’s hand and conjures a chair for her; she stealthily adds an extra Cushioning Charm to it. After setting a precise one hour timer, Severus plops directly onto a blanket on the ground, spreading his thin limbs out leisurely.

The three of them settle in in the middle of the labyrinth, and they wait.

Hour 7: The Child

“You are aware—” Severus’s drawling voice rings out in the rustling night, “it is highly improbable that this will work.” He shifts on the blanket on the ground and peers up at his

long blonde-haired friends, sitting restlessly in rickety chairs above him, holding hands under the twinkling stars.

“Yes, we are aware, Severus,” Narcissa replies, her face pinched in displeasure. “But it was the only option left. We’ve tried all types of potions and pills, charmed pendants, exotic plants. The Healers have all told us it wouldn’t be possible. We even went to see a seer—”

“Who was no help whatsoever,” her husband adds.

“—And this was the only option left to try.” She solemnly dips her head. “Though the ritual is distasteful, the Malfoys and the Blacks need an heir. We saw no other way to accomplish this.”

“If you’re sure,” says Severus hesitantly. “The probability of success is heavily based on intent. If you aren’t one hundred percent set in your resolve, right now is your last chance to reconsider.”

Lucius meets the hard determined gaze of his beautifully intimidating wife.

“We're absolutely sure,” he responds for the both of them.

Severus nods once then looks towards the conjured bassinet with a breathing bundle of blankets inside.

“Then it’s time,” he says, his ashen face unreadable.

This time, when blood drips into the bubbling cauldron, Severus is the one to emit a distressed moan behind her. A single tear drops from her crystal blue eyes as she speaks.

“In the neverending presence of the stars, a child is abandoned… With the blood of youth and innocence, an old life becomes new.”

The cauldron sputters then calms, changing into a dark cloudy grey. It swirls placidly, reflecting the clear night sky above.

They bury the unbreathing bundle of blankets in a tiny wooden box near the edge of the trees. Severus waves his wand and a patch of white roses sprouts from the newly turned earth. As silent tears stream down her pale cheeks, he looks away, posture stiff and hands clenched. Lucius stands on her other side staring morosely at the white roses on the ground, grey eyes rimmed with red.

By the time she leads them back to the center of the maze, her tears have dried and her heart has solidified into a heavy dense weight in the center of her chest. She knows that no matter how many years pass, the weight—the guilt—will never truly go away. She vows to never let this moment be forgotten; for every year until the day she dies, Narcissa visits the white roses by the trees, her chest heavy and a single tear on her cheek.

Instead of returning to her conjured chair, she neatly sinks onto the blanket next to her dark-haired friend. She lightly squeezes his hand in comfort; he does not squeeze back, but he does not pull away either. Her husband, after a perplexed look, settles down next to her.

They stare at the blinking stars shimmering above them in the endless open sky, and they wait.

Hour 14: The Father

He is drifting, swimming through a luxurious stream of hazy thoughts and enticing images. He pictures crispy bacon, buttered toast, runny eggs, juicy mushrooms, and tangy baked beans. His mouth waters and his stomach growls.

Severus's droning voice breaks his tantalizing dreams. "What happens if someone finds out?"

Lucius blinks open his eyes and squints directly into the blazing summer sun. He shuts his eyes again and groans.

"No one will find out," he says to his fretting friend. His wife lies casually dozing between them, the faint crease of stress on her brow faded away in sleep.

"The three of us have already made the Unbreakable Vow never to speak of this again."

"The Notts are a liability. If Mrs. Nott was foolish enough to blab about it to your wife, then I cannot imagine who else she might have told. They need to be dealt with," says Severus stiffly.

"That will be easy enough," he says, rising to a sitting position and cracking his neck gloriously. Severus winces at the sound. "Mr. Nott will be simple. I can invite him out for a drink saying I wish to discuss a business deal—he'd never refuse such an offer—and obliviate him then. Narcissa can visit Mrs. Nott and her new baby in a few weeks and do the same. We can erase all knowledge of the ritual from their minds."

Severus, on the verge of protesting, is interrupted by a stirring Narcissa between them.

"Maybe they should still keep part of their memories," she says, yawning delicately behind a pale hand. "In case someone looks, it won't be as obvious that they've been obliviated."

"That's… not a bad idea." Severus steeples his long narrow fingers in contemplation. "If we could subtly alter their memories so that anyone looking through them would instantly dismiss it as nonsense… "

"What, like changing it to a goat sacrifice or—"

"Exactly!" their dark-haired friend exclaims animatedly.

Narcissa wouldn't be surprised if in the next moment he jumped from the ground writhing excitedly like the Giant Squid when students feed it a smidgen of bread. She supposes sleep deprivation will do that to a person.

He babbles on, oblivious to his squid-like squirming.

"It's the same principles, but just different enough. It's like using the truth to leave a false trail!"

“I need a cup of tea,” Lucius groans, not used to an exhilarated Severus Snape first thing in the morning.

“Soon, darling.” His wife pats his head consolingly. “You can’t eat or drink for an hour before your part of the ritual.”

“Yes, I know dear,” he responds grudgingly.

“Which is just about now,” comes Severus’s voice from over by the cauldron where he is once again checking the time. *When had he gotten up and moved?* Lucius rubs his eyes in confusion.

“It’s time!” Severus calls over to him agitatedly.

“Alright, alright,” he says, getting to his feet and stumbling towards the cauldron.

When his blood unhurriedly drips into the whirling liquid, there is no gasp of concern from his wife or anguished moan from his friend. He speaks into the frothing cauldron below him.

“Over the brightness of the sun, a father becomes a teacher… With the blood of hope and fear, a new life grows.”

The liquid churns and spins, faster and faster, changing into a deep black-tinted crimson. It is a tornado of unearthly burgundy twirling dangerously in a small gold cauldron.

Severus hastily pushes Lucius out of the way and begins throwing the rest of the prepared ingredients into the circling red soup. He slams the lid closed when a particularly threatening tendril of liquid gets perilously close to sloshing out the side.

“Is it supposed to do that?” says Lucius, the master of the house, scratching the stubble on his chin.

“I’m not sure,” responds Severus, the master of potions, looking baffled.

“It’s fine. That’s normal,” says Narcissa from a few meters away where she is bent over a heavy book in her lap. “It says here that ‘Although the color of the potion varies widely between makers due to different magical signatures and emotional discrepancies, after the third addition without fail, the potion will become volatile and may even lash out violently. This may be attributed to excess energy caused by the final combination of life forces bonding.’”

“Where did you read that?” says Severus, disbelievingly. He flounces up to her and peers over her shoulder at the block of text.

“It says here, in the sidenotes under ‘What is the best type of cauldron to use for fertility potions?’ You must have skipped this section since you already know so much about cauldrons.”

“Well, that is just ridiculous. It has nothing to do with the type of cauldron we’re using.”

“You’re correct. The writers should be ashamed,” she says gravely, her blue eyes sparkling.

Severus frowns at her, recognizing her sly tone, but before he can begin a highly educational oration about the benefits of organizing one’s notes, Lucius intercedes.

“Mind if I order some food while we have this riveting discussion?” he says, absently patting his aching stomach.

“Certainly, darling,” his wife replies.

“I’m not hungry,” says Severus.

So Lucius orders food and the house elves bring trays laden with a hearty English breakfast. They gorge themselves—Severus included after vehemous protesting—on delicious sausage and piping hot tea, bickering into the afternoon as they wait.

Hour 21: The Family

“Out of strength and sacrifice, what is lost may now be found… what is discarded now retrieved… what is gone may return anew.”

Severus stands under the boiling afternoon sun waving his wand in an endless circling motion above the cauldron. The liquid seethes quietly, its red color so dark as to be approaching black.

“Infans prodidit,” he says, drawing out each syllable with another rotation of his wand.

The potion flashes a bright blinding white before settling into an opaque cream color. The temperature in the clearing plummets; a layer of frost can be seen accumulating on the side of the gold cauldron. The network of ruins in the surrounding area glow a sinister red before fading back to a calloused black.

“It’s finished,” he says, ladelling milk-white potion into multiple glass vials. He passes one of them to Narcissa and one to Lucius. “Take this, three drops, whenever you have *relations* .” He grimaces around the word, as if *relations* are something unpleasant. Lucius smirks behind him. “You MUST be pregnant by the next new moon or the ritual has failed. Taking the potion will not be pleasant; taking the potion and failing to conceive will be worse.”

“I understand,” says Narcissa, understanding.

“Lovely,” says Lucius dryly, holding up the glass vial and watching the sun dance through it.

“Once you conceive, you must continue taking three drops daily to strengthen the life sharing properties of the potion. Forgetting to do so will lead to early termination of the pregnancy and unforeseeable consequences to your health.”

Lucius glances at his wife concerned, then nods at his friend.

“After the nine months pass and you’ve hopefully given birth, according to my calculations and the potency of the potion, you can reduce the dosage to three drops once a week for the

next seven months, giving it to the baby as well. The seven months after that you can limit it further to three drops every two weeks. And finally in the last seven months you can take only three drops once a month."

Narcissa looks at the bottle in her hand of the pearly white potion that she will be diligently taking for the next two years. She hopes it doesn't taste as disgusting as the other potions she's tried. The one involving a Polyjuice variant was the worst.

"Until we know the exact effects of the potion on your health and the baby,"—he points a finger accusingly at them—"DO NOT MISS A SINGLE DOSE. It will be easier to mitigate the effects of overdosing than trying to repair severed bonding magic. It would also be best if you stayed together on the manor grounds as much as possible; I believe the magic will be most effective here since that's where the ritual occurred."

Narcissa pockets the potion and clutches Severus's hand in her own, white on white.

"Thank you, Severus, for all you've done to help us," she says earnestly. "If this works, you'll be the godfather, won't you?"

He moves as if to pull his hand away, but she grasps it tighter.

"I suppose I could," he responds wearily. "Thank you for trusting me with this."

"We wouldn't trust anyone else," Lucius says, clapping a hand on his friend's bony shoulder, "with our family."

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"Cissy, you mustn't do this, you can't trust him—"

Darting up behind her, Bellatrix catches hold of her running sister's arm and swings her around so that they are facing each other in the narrow cobbled street.

"The Dark Lord trusts him, doesn't he?"

"The Dark Lord is... I believe... mistaken," Bellatrix pants, her black eyes gleaming momentarily under her hood as she looks around to check that they are indeed alone.

"I've trusted him before with Draco's life; I will trust him again," Narcissa says, her blue eyes hard and cold in the narrow patch of street light. She trusted him at a time when all hope for a child was lost. She trusted him as Lucius's friend and ally to the cause. Even if in the intervening years they've grown apart and Lucius has grown bitter by their old friend's rising position under the Dark Lord, she still trusts him.

"He's betrayed you before; he will betray you again," her sister replies scathingly.

Never. Impossible. They made a vow bound by Death. He would never betray them, is incapable of betraying them.
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"Let go, Bella!" she snarls as she draws her wand from beneath her cloak, holding it threateningly in the Bellatrix's face. Her sister merely laughs. She brings down her wand like a knife, and with a flash of light Bellatrix lets go of her arm as though burned.

She rushes ahead and hurries up a street named Spinner's End until she reaches the very last house in the dilapidated Muggle neighbourhood.

Narcissa knocks on the faded wooden door before her sister, cursing under her breath, catches up to her. After a few seconds, the door cracks open and a man with greasy dark hair and a sallow face peers out at them.

"What?" he demands of the shadowing darkness. Narcissa throws back her hood, revealing her pale face and long blonde hair streaming down her back.

"Severus, I need your assistance" she says, her voice nothing but a strained whisper. "May I speak to you? It's urgent."

She would do anything for Draco, has done anything for Draco. She would sacrifice and kill, turn to the enemy for help, trust Severus Snape.

Anything for Draco.

"But of course," Severus replies, stepping aside to allow her and her sister to pass him into the house.

When she gazes at him beseechingly and tears stream down her pale cheeks, he looks away, his posture stiff and hands clenched. He can't bear looking at her now, crying in his tiny sitting room distressed over her helpless child, just as he couldn't bear looking at her then, crying amongst the trees standing over a patch of white roses.

When she crumples, falling at his feet, sobbing and moaning onto the floor, her sister does not help her up from the ground. *He does,* with steady hands and quiet words.

And when she asks him "Will you make the Unbreakable Vow?" seizing his hand in both of hers, pleading desperation for her silver-haired child in her wavering voice, he unwillingly agrees…

…again.

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Malfoy Manor is cold and quiet.

The hallways are silent; the rooms are empty.

That is, all rooms except for one, decorated in midnight blues and luxurious fabrics.

Narcissa softly pads up the winding staircase, past her secluded landing by the window, and into the hushed room. She looks over the three sleeping occupants displayed in the cavernous room.
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Draco slouches in his seat, his chest leaning so far forward as to be touching the massive bed he sits beside. He twitches agitatedly in sleep and emits a low whine of distress. His right hand is clasped tightly onto his wife's frailer one, unwilling to let go even in sleep.

"Miraculous," the Healers had said to a recovering Astoria holding their newborn child in her arms, "Astounding… incredible… lucky."

Later, the Healers had taken Draco aside and whispered to him in the shadowing corridor, "Unbelievable… improbable… inescapable."

"Fatal."

Draco had nodded his head solemnly, plastered on a strained smile, and returned to his wife's bedside as she cooed over Scorpius, whose grey eyes and silver hair were the spitting image of his father. The father who is currently sleeping restlessly beside his healing wife and innocent child.

Narcissa sits on the other side of the dark blue quilted bed and listens to the shallow breathing of her son, daughter-in-law, and grandson mixing in the sleeping room.

"He did not want to tell you."

Astoria opens her heavy eyelids and sits up slowly in the bed, rearranging a couple of patterned pillows but never letting go of her husband's hand.

"I know," she responds nervously to her bedside visitor, "but I wish he would. I'm the one that has to live with this terribly inconvenient blood curse afterall."

Her mother-in-law has never been particularly welcoming towards her, always polite yet cold. Astoria had always blamed Narcissa's frostiness on her tolerant views towards Muggles and inability to live up to the Malfoys' prestigious pureblood reputation. Astoria hopes her blunt disapproval of Draco's decision not to confide in her won't make Narcissa even more disappointed in having her for a daughter-in-law. Draco says her honesty is part of her charm, but he also says that about her wild bedhead, so she can't really take his word on it.

This will be one of the first meaningful conversations that her mother-in-law has initiated, usually preferring to ignore Astoria and fixate on her beloved son instead. Astoria hopes she doesn't bollocks the moment up.

Narcissa hums thoughtfully while staring at the occupied crib at the end of the bed.

"You knew long before the pregnancy started, didn't you?" She directs her question at the weak woman in the bed, pale from exhaustion, stress, and the malicious curse that runs through her veins and prevents her from going outdoors most months out of the year.

"Yes," Astoria sighs heavily, "if Draco had known the full risk involved, he would have never allowed Scorpius to be born."

"And you didn't care about the risk." A statement, almost an accusation.

“That’s not—I would never—Of course I cared!” she shouts hysterically. Draco twitches in his sleep at the harsh sound. She caresses Draco’s hand, letting his sleeping presence calm her. To think that she would be so neglectful as to not care about the great risk to her health by having a child.

Of course she cared!

But in the end, she cared about Draco more, and that is what led her to make the decision that she did.

“Of course I cared,” she says again. “However, it was worth the risk. The curse… it is gradually getting worse… eventually it will kill me, and I did not want him to be alone after I’m gone.”

“I think I’m finally beginning to understand.” Narcissa looks at her with crystal clear eyes and a thoughtful tilt of her head, her long blonde hair glowing ethereally in the darkened room. It gives her the look of a vengeful angel contemplating the sins of the mere mortal cowering before her.

“W-what do you understand?” Astoria says anxiously.

“This was all for Draco.”

“Yes—I,” she says, still clutching Draco’s hand. “I would do anything for him.”

“Anything? Even risking your own life for his happiness?”

“Yes, anything. Even… that.”

Astoria doesn’t know what Narcissa wants her to say. Should she apologize for recklessly endangering her health with the pregnancy and making Draco worry? Or should she confidently stand behind her decision knowing it was worth the sacrifice in the long run?

Her intimidating mother-in-law is still assessing her with sharp blue eyes.

“Would you die for Draco?” Narcissa asks suddenly, breaking the tense silence.

“I… yes, if it came down to that,” she says, uncertainly.

“Would you kill for Draco?”

“I…” Astoria hesitates. This seems an awful lot like a trap. She can only hope her honest answers won’t dig her way into an early grave (or an even earlier grave).

“I would, yes.”

“I would too.” Narcissa looks back at the crib sitting near the end of the bed with a breathing bundle of blankets inside.

“I already have.”

Astoria is at once shocked by Narcissa's confession and simultaneously unsurprised by it. She had assumed that during the war, the Malfoys had taken part in certain unpleasant activities to ensure their family's safety, but it is unnerving to have her suspicions confirmed by her normally closed-off mother-in-law.

"Does Draco know?" she finally asks after she has managed to compose her unsettled thoughts.

"He does not," Narcissa says sharply, "and he will never know. Just like how Scorpius will never know the true sacrifice you made for him."

"I—yes, yes, he will never know," Astoria rushes to agree. She would never blurt out someone else's secrets like that, especially when it seems Narcissa is just beginning to trust her. Also, putting such a burden on your own child would be completely unfair and really quite terrible.

Another heavy silence falls on the hushed room. Astoria holds her breath, too afraid to move as she waits for Narcissa's response.

A rustling sound starts in the crib by the bed, followed by a low gurgle and then an anguished cry.

"I'll take him. You should continue resting," Narcissa says, standing from her perch on the bed and swiftly bending over the crib to cradle a squirming Scorpius in her arms.

"You don't have to—"

"Stay," Narcissa commands in that decisive way of hers that leaves no room for argument.

Narcissa retreats from the room and stops in the dimly lit doorway holding Scorpius warmly to her chest. In a quiet voice, she addresses Astoria, still resting in the bed and holding Draco's hand.

"I know you think I disapprove of your relationship with my son, that I am disappointed in you. I admit that my original impression of you was not favorable. You were too weak—too soft. I believed Draco needed someone stronger, someone who understood his past and could help him move beyond it."

"However…" she shifts her hold on the baby and meets Astoria's astonished eyes across the room. "I was wrong. You complement my son in ways that I didn't know were possible. So… thank you for being there for him and for loving him. That is really the only thing that matters to me, that he has found someone who loves him as much as he deserves. I am… proud to call you my daughter."

Narcissa glides out of the room, closes the door, and leaves the softly spoken words lingering behind her.

Daughter, Narcissa had said. This will mark the first time that Narcissa has accepted Astoria's status as a Malfoy and shown approval for her and her relationship with Draco.

Astoria nearly cries.

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Draco freely cries.

He slouches in his seat, his chest leaning so far forward as to be touching the massive bed he sits beside, his tears leaving wet stains on the faded blue sheets. His right hand, wrinkled and worn with age, is clasped tightly onto his mother's frailer one, unwilling to let go even for a minute, as if Narcissa will disappear the moment his grip loosens.

This is the same, and yet so much worse than when he sat beside his dying wife many decades ago and helplessly watched as she succumbed to the curse blistering through her veins.

"Draco, darling," Narcissa says in a scratchy voice, "There's no need to cry." Her voice is weak from years and years of spell casting, impassioned speeches, and familial laughter.

Her son startles at the sound of her voice and hastily wipes his eyes with the back of his hand.

"I thought you were sleeping," he says looking extremely flustered, his silver-white hair thrown around in disarray.

"Not anymore. I was awoken by this dreadful wailing sound." Narcissa stares down her nose haughtily.

Draco hurries to explain. "I didn't mean to wa—"

"It sounded like an animal was dying in here."

Draco looks mortally offended by that. "Mother, please. I was *not* —"

"I never knew you were such an ugly crier," she finishes unperturbed, a wicked smirk curling her lips.

"Now you're just being rude," he huffs angrily, but his grey eyes crinkle in amusement before his expression turns somber once more.

Noticing the change, Narcissa calmly comforts Draco. "Really, darling, there's no need to cry. I've lived a long and happy life, and I'm so very grateful for that. Having you was absolutely the best part of all of it… But now, it's my time."

"You said you would do anything for me. Can't you just stay… a little longer… for me?"

"You know that's not how these things work." She looks at Draco wistfully. Her son, her brave stubborn son who has endured more in his life than she ever wanted him to. "If I could, I would do anything for you, but this… this is for me, the last thing of my own."

"I—I understand, but I wish I didn't need to. Are you—" He stares at his cherished mother, the pillar of his life, the anchor to his chaotic family. "Are you scared?"
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“Oh,” says Narcissa, surprised by the question. She supposes she used to be scared, used to cower in fear of the unknown, like during roiling thunderstorms. It used to be that she couldn’t imagine leaving Draco alone: not being able to care for him, not being able to protect him anymore.

But now. He has his friends to care for him, and he has his family to protect him. He has Scorpius and Albus, his grandchildren, his great-grandchildren, and a great-great-grandchild on the way. Draco is loved, and he is safe.

“No, I’m not afraid of Death,” she responds. And she’s not; she’s really not.

“I really will miss you though.”

“As will I.”

Her breath starts to falter, her heartbeat slowing to a leisurely rhythm. Her grip on Draco’s hand loosens as her eyelids start to droop with a comforting weight.

Draco makes a distressed sound beside her, his grip tightening even more on her frail hand. It would be painful if she could still feel her hand. She manages to keep her heavy eyelids open as she soothes her distraught son, still so handsome even with age.

“It’s alright, dear,” she says, “I’m ready.”

And then she greeted Death as an old friend, and went with her gladly, and, equals, they departed this life.

Chapter End Notes

That concludes Part 3! With Narcissa peacefully accepting the life she’s lived, all its ups and downs and sideways moments, while drinking lots of tea. Also, solar eclipse info is totally accurate; did indeed use the Googles to find data regarding astronomical occurrences in 1979-1980.

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

> Rest in peace to the lovely Helen McCrory. I usually don't pay attention to such coincidences, but I hope that she has found her peace, just as her character Narcissa has.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Another Tale of the Three Sisters

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There were once three sisters who were traveling along a lonely, winding road at twilight.

There were once three sisters who were as similar as the Sun, Moon, and Stars at twilight.

That is to say, they were not so similar at all. Though they shared the same ancient name, walked the same youthful path, were gifted the same powerful magic; they were, really, quite remarkably different.

Born to the same noble house, they bickered and quarrelled, played and pretended, lived and grew. When their father, who was stoic and calm, became reclusive and withdrawn, one sister noticed nothing; another sister watched from afar; the last sister took to the garden and challenged him in the evening air. When their mother, who was obstinate and strong-willed, became hard and demanding, one sister agreed without complaint; another sister reluctantly heeded her command; the last sister fled into the night, never to return.

Though the three sisters traveled—hurtled, drifted, strolled—along the same winding road, they were as different as they were the same.

The oldest sister, who was a prideful woman, had locks of unruly black and eyes of gleaming madness. Fiercely loyal and vindictively cunning, she ruthlessly protected those in her care. When her younger sister of shocking blonde hair clumsily tumbled to the floor, she picked her up, brushed her off, and hexed the floor in brutal retaliation.

With a wand of unyielding ability she quested for strength, hunting far and wide for an equal and a friend. She found, instead, a teacher with feral red eyes and a skull-like face; she learned fear and control under his cruel harsh hand. As the years went by she struggled with the voice within, an insidious whisper of weakness and doubt. She listened to the voice as she befriended a girl with curly red hair. She listened again as she sat in her dingy cell, staring out at the never changing grey. And, finally, she listened as she toppled by a blinding blue light from the wand belonging to the same girl with fiery hair and crinkling eyes.

Started in jest and ending in death, without exception, she listened.
~~~

The second sister, who was an uncompromising woman, had curls of frizzy auburn and tears of blood-soaked grief. Devastatingly loyal and cautiously ambitious, she cultivated her small family, planting the seeds and carefully nurturing the sprouts. In an empty classroom she chose a boy with sandy blonde hair, his warm hazel eyes, and inviting soft lips. When an infant with spiky pink hair followed not long after, she hesitantly strengthened the roots, watering them and coaxing them to grow deeper, until they were deeper than even she knew.

With a round white stone twisting in her hand she descended into an endless spiral of pain and desperation. She cried standing in an abandoned garden, alive, as her sister of sinister black hair laid in the frozen unmoving ground, dead. She loathed her sister in the soil and all her maddened beliefs, the cause of the unrelenting ache in her chest and the merciless tears that streamed down her face.

She carried on alone wandering, wallowing, waiting before fading away with hopeless longing.

Lastly, the third and youngest sister, who was a patient woman, had a braid of straightened blonde and a mind of hidden questions. Formidably loyal and skillfully resourceful, she guarded her thoughts from the world with a pleasant smile and soft-spoken platitudes. When her sister of frantic auburn hair searched for her in the sprawling family manor, she learned to hide deep in the shadows and move in the darkness. On one cloudy crackling night after discovering her flawless parents beaten and broken, she silently tucked their shameful secrets away into the farthest corners of her mind.

With a cape of unknown potential she shaped her husband of white-blonde hair into a pillar of wealth and prestige. Upon hearing of her barren fate, she refused to listen. Willing to do the unimaginable, sacrifice the unacceptable, she bore an heir with silver-blonde hair and war-tainted robes. Later, whilst her grey-eyed family fumbled and fell, she wordlessly gathered the pieces and ensured her enemy’s destruction.

In the shadows she worked, and in the shadows she stayed.

In time, the sisters continued on their way, encountering treacherous waters and wondering triumphs on their perilous adventure of life. As the planets aligned, nebulae formed, and comets crashed, so too, did the three sisters fly across the vast boundless sky.

The first sister blazed like the Sun, bright and strong. She had a flaring passion inside her, beaming out of her for all to see. Yet there was but one who dared to touch, lest they be scorched in searing failure. They stoked her, flattered her, mastered her, into turning her simmering devotion into a scalding weapon. The flames smoldered, lighter and hotter, unbearably so until they consumed her, and burned everyone around her.

The second sister shone like the Moon, determined yet trapped in a malicious cycle. She flickered through phases of full awareness and new despair, waxing loneliness and waning distress. With a pale facade of laughter and teasing banter, the dark side of her ineluctable anguish lingered behind, remaining valiantly unseen. She was left to aimlessly orbit the Earth, to be eternally covered in the darkness of the cold desolate night.

The third sister twinkled like the Stars, easily overshadowed but still shimmering steadily beneath the clouds. She observed from her distant perch the vicious battle between the Sun and the Moon. Overwhelmed by the bright light of the Sun and ignored by the somber light of the Moon, she quietly endured through it all. The other stars joined her in her contemplation; even when her Star had dimmed to an imperceptible glow, her constellation glimmered on.

Dawn radiates out, when the Moon bids goodbye to a waking Sun… Or dusk trickles in, when the Sun bids goodbye to a stirring Moon.

But in the end, aren't they, really, just the same? Both the Sun and the Moon bid goodbye, and yet the Stars remain.

As inevitable as the day and inescapable as the night, always, twilight must pass on. The Sun and the Moon in one fathomless fleeting moment: rising, setting, living in the same open sky, and waving to the Stars as they pass by.

In due course the sisters separated, each for her own destination.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading my first ever fanfiction! I welcome constructive criticism, but I'm actually a smol bean who's very fragile, so please be gentle with me.

I had a lot of fun writing this and I hope you had just as much fun (or feels) reading it! Maybe I'll see you next time :)

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